

---

This is a reproduction of a library book that was digitized by Google as part of an ongoing effort to preserve the information in books and make it universally accessible.

Google™ books

<https://books.google.com>



NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES



3 3433 10360 8752



BTZE  
Russell











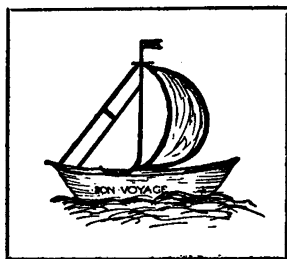
**WITH THE  
MACHINE GUN CORPS**



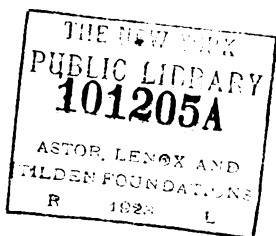
# With the Machine Gun Corps

From GRANTHAM  
to COLOGNE

By  
*Arthur Russell*



London :  
DRANES,  
DANEGELD HOUSE : 82a FARRINGDON ST. : E.C.  
1923  
W.T.P.



*London:*  
*Drane's, Farringdon Street, E.C.*

# CONTENTS.

---

Chapter	Page
I. THE RECRUITS ... ..	5
II. IN TRAINING ... ..	9
III. TRANSFERRED TO THE MACHINE GUN CORPS ...	15
IV. MY FIRST WEEK IN FRANCE ... ..	18
V. TRENCH WARFARE AT QUINCHY AND CAMBRIN —May-June, 1916 ... ..	24
VI. BAZENTIN RIDGES—July 14-21, 1916 (Battle of the Somme) ... ..	30
VII. HIGH WOOD—August 5-17, 1916 (Battle of the Somme) ... ..	39
VIII. I JOIN THE 13TH COMPANY AT LEUZE WOOD (Somme, September, 1916) ... ..	46
IX. MY LAST FEW DAYS ON THE SOMME BATTLE- FIELD, September, 1916 ... ..	53
X. ABOUT NO. 4 SECTION AND THE 13TH M.G. COMPANY GENERALLY ... ..	63
XI. FESTUBERT AND GIVENCHY ... ..	67
XII. TRENCH WARFARE DURING NOVEMBER AND DECEMBER, 1916 ... ..	74
XIII. TRENCH FATIGUES, A RAID, AND A SPELL IN HOSPITAL ... ..	82
XIV. THE STORMING OF VIMY RIDGE (Easter, 1917) ... ..	93
XV. LENS—April, 1917 ... ..	100
XVI. HOLDING THE OPPIY LINE (Battle of Arras)— May, 1917 ... ..	107
XVII. DIVISIONAL REST, PLUS R.E. FATIGUES AND AIR RAIDS ... ..	115
XVIII. ANOTHER SPELL OF DUTY IN THE TRENCHES AT OPPIY (June, 1917) ... ..	119

# CONTENTS—continued.

Chapter.		Page.
XIX.	IN WHICH I PROCEED ON TEN DAYS' LEAVE TO BLIGHTY, July, 1917 ... ..	126
XX.*	THE DIVISION MOVES FROM ARRAS TO THE YPRES SALIENT ... ..	134
XXI.	PREPARING FOR THE ATTACK ... ..	139
XXII.	OVER THE TOP—PASSCHENDAELE OFFENSIVE, October 4, 1917 ... ..	145
XXIII.	THE PASSCHENDAELE OFFENSIVE OF AUTUMN, 1917 ( <i>continued</i> ) ... ..	154
XXIV.	THE FIFTH DIVISION GOES TO ITALY ... ..	161
XXV.	ON THE PIAVE FRONT, JANUARY-MARCH, 1918	165
XXVI.	RE-CALLED TO FRANCE ... ..	170
XXVII.	BARRING THE ROAD TO THE CHANNEL PORTS (Nieppe Forest, April-July, 1918) ... ..	174
XXVIII.	OPENING DAYS OF THE "GRAND ALLIED OF- FENSIVE," August, 1918 ... ..	183
XXIX.	THE FINAL VICTORIOUS ASSAULTS ... ..	190
XXX.	THE ARMISTICE ... ..	195
XXXI.	IN OCCUPIED GERMANY ... ..	201
XXXII.	HOMeward BOUND ... ..	206
XXXIII.	DEMobilIZATION ... ..	211
XXXIV.	CONCLUSION .... ..	213

# WITH THE MACHINE GUN CORPS.

---

## CHAPTER I.

### THE RECRUITS.

**I**T was late one night during the month of November, 1915, that I arrived at the Dépôt Barracks of the East Yorkshire Regiment in the town of Beverley in the roll of a newly enlisted recruit. Several days had elapsed since I had first presented myself at the Reading Recruiting Office, where, after being medically examined and passed as a suitable recruit for the Infantry of the Line and sworn allegiance to my King and Country, I had, at my own request been posted to this Regiment at whose Dépôt I was now reporting. Entering the Guard Room I handed over the warrant which I had received before leaving Reading to one of several men on duty here, who immediately took it across to the Orderly Room. Returning within a few minutes he then escorted me over the Barrack Square to the main block of buildings. Following my guide up several flights of stone stairs, I presently found myself, for the first time in my life, in a large Barrack Room. This room, which was one of many, was about one hundred and fifty feet long and forty feet wide, and down each of the two sides were ranged some twenty small folding iron bedsteads, most of which were made ready for sleeping upon, while several others were still closed up.

Down the centre of the room were three large dining tables and several long forms, while midway down one side was a large fireplace. Round a blazing coal fire were sat some dozen or more men, several of whom I noticed were, like myself, still wearing their civilian attire. It was a strange group of men and youths among which I was now numbered; several were of the "old soldier" type, but most of them were newly enlisted recruits drawn from all classes of the community. Having introduced me, as it were, to my comrades of the future, my guide from the Guard Room returned to his duties. After a short chat with my new

acquaintances in the fire circle I soon began to feel quite at home amid the strange surroundings.

As it was now getting late it was not long before a general move was made towards our respective beds. Mine was one of those still closed up, so with some little assistance from one of my new found comrades I got the regulation barrack room bedstead pulled out to its full length of six feet, placed the three "biscuits," otherwise the small and somewhat hard mattresses on the steel laths, and arranged the bedding, which consisted of one long narrow pillow, not over soft, two sheets of uncertain colour, and three dark-looking blankets. Before turning in for the night I was informed that the reveille in the morning would be at six o'clock, and that I was to "fall in" on the Square with the rest of the recruits at half-past six for my first army parade.

While contemplating my future prospects soon after getting into my bed, which at first felt uncomfortably hard, a bugler on duty sounded the "lights out" call, and a few seconds later the Barrack Room was in total darkness. In spite of the hardness of my bed and the thoughts of a very uncertain career of soldiering sleep soon predominated.

I was awake next morning a few minutes before the first notes of "Reveille" were sounded, and before the last notes had barely died away the Orderly Sergeant had entered the room shouting at us at the top of his voice to "shew a leg" and get a move on. By the time I had got washed and dressed in readiness for parade a bucket of tea, usually referred to as "gun fire," had been brought into the room by the Mess Orderly, or as he was more frequently called, the "Orderly Buffer."

Five minutes before the time for the first parade of the day we all trooped down on to the square. At the Depôt, East Yorkshire Regiment, the parades were assembled by the sounding of a drum, and as soon as the drummer on duty rapped his drum the first time all the men at once responded by lining up by the side, but one pace to the rear, of the half-dozen Sergeant-Instructors who acted as markers. Not knowing who was to be my Instructor, I naturally fell in with the Squad that included those men still wearing civilian clothes. When every man had fallen in the Drummer gave one warning tap before commencing a most vigorous beating, causing a peculiar rolling noise, during

which all the men of each of the squads sprang forward in line with the markers, who then each turned round and started to dress up their respective batch of recruits into a perfectly straight line before the drummer should cease. My squad was somewhat behind and evoked from one of the Sergeants some remark about polishing up our ideas of smartness. The roll was next called, after which the Drill Sergeants began to march their squads away. Three men and myself, all dressed in civilian clothes, were taken from the squad to which we had attached ourselves and taken in hand by another Instructor. For the next hour the four of us were instructed in the rudiments of military foot drill movements. Before being dismissed for breakfast the whole parade was doubled round and round the square for some five or more minutes. Feeling very hungry after my first "before breakfast parade" I accompanied my fellow room mates back to our den, but it was eight o'clock before breakfast was brought upon the scene.

Sitting down at a bare wood table in a Barrack Room for one's first army meal is an episode not very soon forgotten. The tea, of a very weak nature, was poured out into basins, one for each man, while the bread was divided into more or less equal rations, and from a large round tin we helped ourselves to a not very large piece of bacon. After this frugal meal each man commenced to prepare himself for the nine o'clock parade, at which an inspection was evidently the rule. Those men in khaki had perforce to polish their buttons and badges, and, of course, daily shaving was a standing order strictly obeyed only by those who could not possibly avoid doing so.

Prompt at nine o'clock we were all once more on parade, but the new arrivals, such as myself, who had not yet received their uniform, instead of resuming our drills were marched to the Quartermaster's Stores. In the clothing stores the "quarter bloke" did not by any means dilly-dally with the work of fitting out us raw recruits with our army kit and uniform. It was the work of only a few minutes to satisfy the Quartermaster (not us) that the two khaki tunics we each received were good fits, and any comments on our part were unceremoniously answered by being told to take what was given us. Our selection of hats and boots also had to be made in record time, otherwise take just what he assigned to us, whether or not they were the correct size.

All the rest of the paraphernalia of a soldier's home service kit was likewise hurriedly supplied from an unlimited source. We then had to get every article of clothing and miscellaneous articles such as housewife, holdall and brushes stamped with our newly-acquired regimental number. Packing all our new possessions into a large kit-bag we carried them over to our Barrack Room, with instructions to parade at 10.30 arrayed in our khaki uniforms. In adorning ourselves with our uniforms some little difficulty was encountered with the puttees, but these were mastered to some satisfaction, and at the appointed hour we again lined up on the drill square to receive a critical examination under the eyes of our Drill Instructor. In our own estimation our dress was beyond reproach, but not so in that of our much-experienced teacher. Buttons came first on the default list for not being sufficiently polished; then our hats had to be adjusted to the correct military angle. Trouser's legs were not pulled over the puttee strings just below the knee to the regulation depth of four inches, while our puttees also failed to meet with much satisfaction. Having pointed out these many faults in our appearance, the squad of some twelve of us was then drilled up and down the square for the rest of the morning. The parades terminated for dinner at 12.30, being resumed again in the afternoon at two o'clock until four. One hour in the afternoon was taken up by physical training, which we underwent in the Gymnasium with a very irate and exacting instructor of P.T. and who required a degree of smartness from us raw recruits as would be expected from time-serving soldiers in pre-war days. Tea, consisting of bread, margarine and jam, was partaken of at 4.30, after which we were free to spend the evening either in the reading and recreation room, the canteen, or go out into the town providing we were in again for the roll-call at 9.30.

Each day the parades were the same—squad drill from 6.30 in the morning to four in the afternoon, with the exception of one hour's P.T. and intervals for breakfast and dinner. During these long days the drill square resounded almost continuously with the Instructor's commands, such as—shun, number, form fours, by the right quick march, right wheel, form two deep, on the right form squad, halt, stand at ease, easy. This continuous foot drill, once the novelty of it had passed off, soon became monotonous, and

we were always pleased when the time for dismissal came round. On the Friday, however, we were given a most decided change in the form of barrack fatigues. These fatigues included the carrying of coal into the Barrack Rooms and washing of windows. My fatigue duty was to wash the Gymnasium windows along with two other men.

During Friday afternoon I was vaccinated by the Dépôt Doctor, as were all the other fresh recruits who had arrived during the week.

This same afternoon I had to take part in a very important parade indeed—the “pay parade.” It was conducted in one of the Barrack Rooms, and the Officer who was to pay us was sat at a table with the money laid out in front of him, while by his side sat the Quartermaster with the pay book. As soon as all the men stationed in the Dépôt were present the Q.M.S. commenced to read out the names, and as each man heard his name called he had to walk smartly up to the table, salute the Officer before receiving his money, and again before leaving the table. When leaving the table every man had to “about turn” in strict military fashion before moving away. On the previous day we new recruits had been given instruction how to salute our officers, so as not to appear awkward on this occasion.

That evening all the recruits assembled in the Dépôt received orders to be ready to leave in the morning for Hull, where we were to join the 3rd Battalion East Yorkshire Regiment. With this Reserve, or Training Battalion as the third was termed, our military training was to commence in real earnest.

## CHAPTER II.

### IN TRAINING.

ON the following morning, Saturday, November 20th, we recruits all marched to Beverley Railway Station, headed by the Dépôt Band, and there took train for the City of Hull. Arriving at this important Yorkshire seaport we formed up outside the station and marched away to our future home. In Hull there are situated several large lodging-houses where seafaring men and others of no fixed abode could obtain a cheap night's lodgings. It was

in one of these lodging-houses known as the Victoria Mansions that we presently found ourselves. This building had been taken over by the Army Authorities and was now doing duty as a Barrack for "E." and "F." Companies of the 3rd Battalion East Yorkshire Regiment. We were guided up several flights of stairs, at the top of each of which branched off some four long corridors lined on either side with about twenty doorways. At the top of the third flight we new-comers were lead down one of these corridors, and each man allotted to a small cubicle, into one of which all the aforementioned doors gave entrance. Each cubicle, or room, was some seven feet long and about six feet wide, with one small oblong window. The furniture in each one consisted of a chair and a small single iron bedstead, while rolled up at the head of the latter was a straw mattress with three neatly folded blankets laid on the top.

Of the two companies occupying this building "E" Company consisted exclusively of "Expeditionary Force" men (men who had already been overseas) who had been discharged from hospital but who were not yet fit for further active service, and was therefore termed the Convalescent Company.

"F" Company, of which myself and companions fresh from the Beverley Depôt were now members, was composed of recruits with from one to ten weeks service. Soon after our arrival dinner was served in a large dining hall on the ground floor. As each man passed through the entrance he received his dinner on a plate from an open window which looked into the room where all the meals were served out; he then had to take it to one of the many tables arranged in rows in the room.

Directly after dinner we paraded outside the Quarter-Master's Stores to receive our equipment and arms. The equipment we were now issued with was the peace-time drill equipment made of buff leather, but which instead of having to be kept white had now to be khaki blanched to match our war-time dress. A service rifle of the short Lee-Enfield pattern with long bayonet was also handed to each one of us, with instructions to regard it as our best friend and to take the greatest possible care of it at all times. Having taken our arms and equipment into our cubicles we next had to appear before the Battalion Doctor for the purpose of receiving our first dose of inoculation. After suffering this

injection we were informed that for the next 48 hours we would be excused all parades. On Monday afternoon, the end of our period of E.D. (excused duty), the Quarter-Master-Sergeant, who performed the duties of Company-Sergeant-Major, paraded us in the recreation room and gave us a short lecture on army discipline, rules and regulations, and also shewed us how to piece together our equipment, how to clean it, and how to take care of our rifles.

Reveille with the 3rd Battalion was at the reasonable hour of 7 o'clock, breakfast at 7.30 to 8, and at 8.30 "F" Company fell in on parade in the street outside the building ready to march to the drill ground, which took the form of a large playing field situated a good mile away from our barracks.

On the Tuesday morning we fell in with the rest of "F" Company and marched to the drill ground for our first parades. Having been given ten minutes grace on our arrival, we commenced the morning's drill with one hour's P.T., followed by two consecutive hours of rifle drill, during which time we became more or less accustomed to the handling of this very important weapon. The morning's drill came to an end at 12 o'clock, when the Company formed up and marched back to Victoria Mansions for dinner. Shortly after half-past one we once more moved away to the scene of the morning's activities, where from two till four we again obeyed implicitly, and to the best of our ability the commands of our Instructor. Tea was served out immediately on our return about half-past four, and after five we were free to go out into the town until half-past nine. Thus for the next few days we continued our training, during which period we became better acquainted with the respective squad sergeants of "F" Company, whom we found to be a good set of Instructors of pre-war training stamp. They were strict when on parade, but off parade they were examples of army comradeship, and although they frequently resorted to that very impolite and coarse language so familiar with Army Drill Instructors, we were soon of the opinion that our Sergeants were the best we could receive our training from.

Ten days after our transfer to the 3rd Battalion we received our final dose of innoculation, following which we were given the usual 48 hours excused duty, and then a

week-end pass from Friday afternoon to Monday midnight to enable us to pay a visit to our homes. On returning at the expiration of this short leave we again resumed our training, which now continued without interruption for several weeks. Twice every week—Wednesday and Saturday—we marched to a more distant training ground at a place called Marfleet, some three miles out of Hull. On the Wednesday we stayed until half-past three in the afternoon, our dinner on that day being prepared by the cooks in an old building close by the fields in which we did our training, but on the Saturday we always returned to our billets in Hull by one o'clock.

During wet weather our drills were by no means curtailed, but were performed under some large shelters on the dock side. Immediately after the mid-day meal on Saturday it was customary for "F" Company to have either a kit inspection or an inspection of rifles, after which we were at liberty to spend the remainder of the day howsoever we chose, either in the barracks or in the City of Hull.

Sunday, of course, was an off day with the exception of a Church Parade in the morning.

As Christmas drew nigh we one and all began thinking of the one week's furlough we would all receive at or about that time, but when the festival was only one week distant the disconcerting news of an early departure from Hull came to our ears. We were officially informed that "F," "G" and "H" Companies would all move to the Camp at Dalton Holme on December 22nd. The day for our migration was the most miserable and least suitable one for a march of 15 or more miles that could have been picked upon, yet it gave us an inkling of what we might expect in the near future. It was pouring with rain when we had to line up in the street at half-past nine on that morning, where we stood for half-an-hour in the drenching rain before moving away. About three hours later our column of men, some five hundred strong and all in a deplorably wet condition, marched into the Market Place, Beverley, where a halt was called for lunch. Sandwiches and tea was first distributed, after which each man received an orange. We resumed our march again at two o'clock with the rain still pouring down. The last lap of this most dismal and unpleasant tramp was accomplished in darkness, which did not by any means help to improve marching conditions.

On entering the field in which the camp was situated we found it to be a veritable sea of mud, and following an unseen guide we went floundering knee deep in slime and puddle in search of our new home. The personnel of "F" Company having inspected the huts placed at our disposal, had then to make a return journey to the entrance of the camp to unload the lorry in which our kit, Company stores, etc., had been conveyed from Hull. The huts in which we were now installed each had accommodation for some 30 men, the sleeping arrangement consisting of boards, which rested on two small trestles about six inches high, and these were ranged down either side. In the centre of the hut was a large coal stove, while it also contained mess tables and forms similar to the Barrack Rooms in Beverley Barracks. Each hut also had a small room partitioned off just inside the entrance; these were the sergeants' bunks, two being allotted to each. That night we had to sleep on the bare boards as our bedding had not arrived.

We had barely time to get accustomed to our new abode and our huts placed in order, let alone our own bedraggled selves, before Christmas was upon us. Owing to our sudden removal from Hull none of us got away on furlough, but our cooks did their utmost to recompense us for this disappointment, and prepared a most sumptuous repast for our Christmas dinner.

As soon as the festival had passed by we had to resume our training in strict earnest, and what we had now to "go through" was much more severe than that which we had experienced at Hull. Bayonet fighting and musketry now took a most prominent part in our training, as also did extended order drill and sham fights and advances across the open country and ploughed fields. These sham attacks were always greatly enjoyed by the men taking part.

Early in January I had my belated seven days Christmas leave, and arrived back in camp in time to be warned for a guard duty the following afternoon. The camp at Dalton Holme was shared by two Battalions—the 3rd Battalion East Yorks. and the 3rd/4th Territorial Battalion East Yorks—and the main quarter guard for the camp was taken over by each unit in alternate weeks; fifteen men were required for this guard every day. The guard mounted each afternoon at half-past four for a period of 24 hours.

Before a new guard took over the duties from the one which had completed its 24 hours of duty the men composing it were always subjected to a severe inspection both of fire arms and personal appearance. When the old guard had been relieved they also were again inspected, for each man had to come off guard duty as clean and smart as when he mounted guard 24 hours previous. It was a severe crime to appear on guard parade with a dirty rifle or equipment, or disarrangement of any part of one's uniform. Such cases were usually punished by ordering the culprit an extra guard to attend, together with so many days "C.B." (confined to barracks). The cells attached to the guard room were usually fully occupied by men who had at some time or other deserted from their regiment or who had been absent without leave and various other offences. Two hours on sentry at one of the four posts, followed by four hours inside the guard room was the usual routine. The guard room at Dalton Holme was quite cosy providing the stove was well looked after, but we were always glad to get back to our own huts again.

By the second week in February we were well advanced in our infantry training, and our Musketry Officer decided that we were ready to proceed any time to the butts at Strensall for the purpose of firing our rifle course. Some few days after this decision a party of about 50 of us journeyed by train to that well-known military training ground. On reaching this camp we were all herded into an exceptionally large hut which already contained quite a number of men belonging to some other unit. The meals which were served out to us here were much inferior to what we received from our own cookhouse at Dalton Holme, and before we had been many hours at Strensall Camp we were longing to be back in our own cosy camp. Many of us were to be back in Dalton Holme Camp sooner than we anticipated. At nine o'clock next morning we were out on parade and waiting to march away to the butts when a party of about 20 of us received the startling orders to return to our hut and pack our kits in readiness to return to Dalton Holme. Some few days ago we had been chosen for transfer to the newly-formed Machine Gun Corps, and as we should all have to fire a series of tests with a machine gun, the authorities deemed it unnecessary for us to fire a rifle course. We were all disappointed at not being allowed to fire our

course and we returned to our Company in anything but good spirits.

### CHAPTER III.

#### TRANSFERRED TO THE MACHINE GUN CORPS.

A PERCENTAGE of the men in Infantry Battalions, who had completed their training and were physically fit to carry out the duties of a machine gunner, were being transferred to the M.G.C. In company with the men with whom I had made such a sudden return journey from Strensall I was hoping to be sent to this new formation soon after arriving back in camp, and my transfer was actually approved of, but two days before I should have left a question arose as to my age. I was 19 at the time, and the required age for the Machine Gun Corps was 20 and over, my name was therefore crossed off the list. All my mates of the last few months went with this draft, so I was determined that I would get to Grantham by some means or other. Being on very friendly terms with the senior Sergeant, I took the first opportunity of asking him if he could possibly get my name on the transfer list. He said he would do his best to get my transfer approved of so that I would go with the next batch of men for the Machine Gun Corps. He kept his word, and in the second week of March my name appeared first on the list for Grantham. My draft left Dalton Holme Camp at seven o'clock on the morning of the 13th March and arrived at Grantham at 12 o'clock the same day.

Arriving at Harrowby Camp we were put into a hut, which already held a good number of men belonging to other regiments who had just arrived. We soon had to be out on the square at the entrance of the camp and take our turn in going before the Medical Officer, who decided whether we were fit or not. Quite a number of men used to get sent back to their units as unfit. We then had to pass through the office and state whether we wished to serve as gunners or drivers. Gunner was my classification, as I had no desire to make the very close acquaintance of the average army mule.

It was close on four o'clock before we got back to our hut for something to eat. We had had nothing but a sandwich which we had with us coming from Dalton. There

was nothing for us but a chunk of bread and a slice of bully beef when we did get there. This came as a shock to us after the good food we had been having with the East Yorks. We had one blanket each for the night and had to make our bed wherever there happened to be a vacant space. All the reception huts were overcrowded as hundreds of fresh men came into the camp every day, and it took two days before any of them got posted to a Service Company or to a Depot Company. I was not posted to a Company until the following afternoon, when I was put on the strength of the 98th Machine Gun Company along with three other men, only one of whom came with me from the East Yorks. It took us some time to find the 98th Company. We found it at last in huts at the far end of the camp. This Company had been formed several weeks and was expected to be sent to France very soon. Every man who was transferred to the Machine Gun Corps was given his Overseas Draft Leave as soon as he was posted to a Company. Before going on my leave I had one day on parade with my section (A Section) and began learning the mechanism of the Vickers' machine gun, belt filling and machine gun drill.

On March 16th I went home on my six days' leave and arrived back on the 22nd. The food which we got with the M.G.C. was very poor, and the Y.M.C.A. used to do good business outside parade hours. The first parade of the day was half-an-hour's infantry drill before breakfast, from 8.30 to 12.30, and 1.30 to 4 o'clock was taken up with training in the use of the machine gun. Gun drill, which occupied about a quarter of our parades and which entailed much running about with the gun and tripod, which were not by any means light articles, was very tiring work.

The first week after I arrived back off leave we commenced firing on the miniature range; this was to test our holding of the traversing handles of the gun. A very firm and even hold of the handles of the machine gun is required to ensure accuracy when firing. The testing of our knowledge of the many stoppages which occur in machine gun fire was also done on the miniature range. Every week we had a route march of about 15 miles. Our transport used to turn out for this parade and each section had to march behind its own gun limbers—three limbers being allotted to each section; two for the four guns and one for ammunition pack saddles, &c. During the first and second

weeks in April all the men in the Company fired two preliminary tests on the range at 100 yards. The second time we went there had been a heavy fall of snow during the night which had drifted against the butts to a depth of three to four feet.

Following these preliminary tests we had to go to the big range, about 4 miles from Harrowby Camp, and fire a final test at a range of 400 yards, to qualify as machine gunners. A few days after this we had a field practice on the same range. On this occasion, however, we had to attach drag ropes to the gun limbers and pull them by hand to the range; we had about 12 men on each limber. Arriving at the range we first of all mounted our guns, 16 in all, at the 600 yards point, and the first man sitting at each gun fired about 100 rounds, and then, when all the guns had stopped firing, advanced them to the 500 yards point. On arriving at this stage the men who had fired passed to the rear of the guns and their place was taken over by other men. This performance went on until we had got down to the point at 200 yards. On reaching this range we began the return journey back to the 600 yards mark, firing a burst at each advance of 100 yards. In performing this stunt we had to get across numerous wide trenches which had been dug at intervals, and these were in several places full of water. This brought our course of firing on the ranges to a close.

We were now very busy preparing for going overseas, and for the last 10 days that we were in England I was working in the Company Office on the nominal roles, charge sheets, &c. During our last week at Grantham we had two special parades for instruction; first was the loading and unloading of all the Company transport for removal by rail. All the mules and horses were put into boxes and limbers securely docked on trucks, and all the men had to get into the carriages allotted to them. The second lesson of instruction was "taking over machine gun positions in the trenches at night." This took place at night in some grounds about four miles from Grantham, where a large number of trenches had been dug and gun positions made at numerous points. We had to get our guns into position in the trenches and send a report back to the C.O., who was at a point about half a mile in the rear. The man who took the report to the Officer brought another back with orders to

return to the limbers. The limbers had been left on the main road. During this performance Verey lights were fired and bombs thrown over the parapets of the trenches to make it seem more real.

Early in April I had been selected for a course of range taking, but owing to the Company receiving orders to prepare for overseas I did not go through a proper course. I managed to get in a few lessons on the barr and stroud before we left, however, with a Sergeant who had already been through a course. The date of our departure for France was finally fixed for Sunday, the 23rd April, 1916. That Sunday was a very busy day. In the afternoon the whole of the Company had to pass before the Doctor for a final medical inspection. Myself and two other men who were working in the office did not go to this inspection as we were too busy to spend a couple of hours outside a doctor's hut. The Company had to be ready to move off at eight o'clock that night. I was working in the office until the last minute. We did not move off to the station, however, until after 11 o'clock, and it was about two o'clock on Monday morning before the train moved out of the station.

## CHAPTER IV.

### MY FIRST WEEK IN FRANCE.

THE 98th M.G. Company arrived at Southampton, the port at which we were to embark, at 8 o'clock on Monday morning, April 24th. It was late in the afternoon before we commenced to embark, and it was 8 o'clock that night before we started on the cross-channel trip. The night was very cold and very few men remained on deck. I went on to the deck for a few minutes after we had got well out, but it was such a night and spray was flying in all directions that I was glad to get below again. I had been asleep several hours when I was awoken by the clanking of chains and my mates moving about, and on going on to the deck was surprised to find that we were entering a harbour which was one blaze of light from numerous electric lamps on the dock sides. This was Le Harve, the French port where we had to disembark. As soon as it was daylight we got off the boat and dumped our kit on the dockside. We were quite ready for breakfast, but we had to

wait some time before the cooks had any on the way. After breakfast we had to commence getting the transport off the boat. The limbers had to be lifted out of the boat with cranes. When steadying one of the limbers as it reached the ground one of the men in my section got his foot underneath a wheel and had his toes badly crushed. In the afternoon we marched to a rest camp and were put in tents for the night. We were up early the next morning and moved off to the station to entrain for the front, but it was four o'clock in the afternoon before the train moved out of the station. The scenery of Northern France is not very interesting, yet the men all clustered round the doorways of the cattle trucks in which we were travelling. The speed at which we travelled was painfully slow; it was quite a simple matter to jump out of a truck and run alongside without any fear of being left behind. As night came on we pulled out our great coats and tried to settle down until daybreak. All our blankets had been left behind, and for the future we had to make our bed with a great coat and one ground sheet. During the night we were continually having stops varying from ten minutes to half-an-hour. About eight o'clock in the morning the train stopped for some time to allow us to get a wash and shave and have breakfast. The train then continued on its way at the same old speed as before.

At mid-day on the 27th April we arrived at Bethune, which was our destination. We had been travelling for 20 hours, but had only covered about 150 miles. When all the baggage was off the train we marched to a school in the town; this was to be our billet for the next few days. This town was five miles behind the trenches, and at night time we could look through the windows of our billet and see quite distinctly the "Verrey Lights" as they soared in the air, and occasionally the rat-a-tat-tat of machine guns could be heard. The 98th Machine Gun Company now formed part of the 98th Infantry Brigade and the 33rd Division, and on Friday morning, the 28th April, we were inspected by the Divisional Commander. At this parade every man in the Company got orders to take the wires out of their hats and to get our buttons polished. Before we left England we had to hand in all our cleaning tackle, and naturally we had not cleaned our buttons since the day we left Grantham. In the afternoon we received our first pay

in French money—five francs. In the evening I was walking up the La Basse road along with a mate when we saw two 8-inch shells drop near the railway 300 to 400 yards in front of us. One or two men who were in the vicinity were slightly wounded. That night we received orders for proceeding to the trenches the next day, Saturday, April 29th. The morning was spent preparing for our visit to the trenches. The Company was going in with the 1st Battalion South Wales Borderers for three days' instruction. Steel helmets were just beginning to be worn by our men when in the trenches, but my Company did not wear them on this trip to the trenches. In the afternoon we marched to the village of Annequin, which is about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles behind the trenches. The communication trenches commenced in this village. We stayed in billets occupied by the 1st Battalion South Wales Borderers. The 98th M.G. Company was now split up among the Infantry, five to eight men being allotted to each platoon. Although this village was situated so close to the line, I was much surprised to see such a large number of civilians living in it, nearly all of whom were women and children. Beer and wine could be bought at the head of the communication trenches. One of the Estaminets was quite close to a battery of 18-pounder guns; the house being on one side of the road and the guns on the other. The woman living there could often be seen standing at her door with arms folded watching our gunners fire a few rounds. As soon as it was dusk we commenced filing into the trenches, and at the same time a battery of field guns opened fire on the German lines. The guns were firing directly over our heads as we wended our way down the communication trench. It took us over half-an-hour to reach the support trench which the platoon which I was with had to occupy. Five of my Company had been attached to this platoon, and on arriving in the trench we were allotted in the way of accommodation a small shelter built in the side of the parapet, but only large enough to hold two men with any degrees of comfort. The dimensions of this palace were not more than—3ft. wide, 4ft. long, and 3ft. high—and five of us had to make the best use we could of this for sleeping in. It was about 8.30 when we arrived at our destination, and at 10 o'clock I had to go on sentry for the first time in company with a man of the South Wales Borderers. Before going on duty I had stripped my equipment of pack,

haversack, &c., &c., as we were allowed this much freedom while in the trenches, but the belt and shoulder straps had always to be worn both night and day. The two hours went very slow, but everything was very quiet; an occasional burst of machine gun fire or the crack of a rifle was the only noise that broke upon the stillness of the night. The front line trench was about 100 yards away, and the German front line trench was another 50 to 100 yards away from ours. I was relieved at mid-night and returned to my bivouac expecting to get two hours uninterrupted sleep, but I had only been laid down for half-an-hour when I was roused out of my slumbers by someone standing in the trench inquiring for myself and one of my mates. We had to turn out immediately and accompany a party of men to another trench in which the entrance to a dug-out had been blocked up by a minenwerfer (German aerial torpedo) bursting in the trench. The trench for several yards had been completely obliterated, and our job was to dig a road through and clear the entrance to the dug-out. It took us about one hour to finish the work; machine gun fire was sweeping over this trench the whole time we were digging.

When we got back to our trench it was time for my second period of sentry duty. I was with the same man as before, but we did not have such a quiet time as we had from 10 o'clock to mid-night. We had not been on our post many minutes before there was a sharp whiz over our heads, and almost immediately a vivid flash as a whiz-bang burst on the parados. This was followed in quick succession by a stream of these shells which made us feel anything but comfortable. This continued for about 20 minutes or more. I was very glad when it got to four o'clock and could hear the footsteps of the men who were to relieve us. We got another scare about an hour later when the gas alarm was given. It was not, however, directly on our divisional front, but on our right, where the gas attack took place. In the event of the Germans sending gas over, gas gongs in the form of old shell cases, which hung at each sentry post were sounded by the men on sentry as soon as they detected any signs of this danger. Stand-to was at six o'clock, so I did not get much more sleep.

It was the custom in the trenches, both at dusk and break of day, for all the men in the trenches to stand on the fire steps with rifles loaded and bayonets fixed. This

was to safeguard against the enemy making a surprise attack on our positions. As soon as it was quite daylight we all stood down, with the exception of the men on sentry, and commenced cleaning our rifles, &c. My fire-arms consisted of a Smith and Wesson service revolver. At this period only eight men in the Company carried revolvers, the remainder being armed with rifle and bayonet. Breakfast was brought up from the field kitchens at eight o'clock by two members of the South Wales Borderers, who acted as orderly men. The cooks had their kitchens in some ruined buildings on a by-road which ran through the villages of Cambrin and Quinchy. This road was called by the British Troops "Harley Street," and was about 1,000 yards behind the trenches. Our breakfast consisted of bread and bacon and a pint of tea. During the morning we were all kept very busy cleaning up the trenches, revetting the sides and cleaning the sump-holes underneath the duck boards. I had a good look round the trenches in our vicinity; they presented quite a different appearance in daylight. They were all named after the manner of streets in a town. I was in Albermarle Road and my sentry post was at the junction of Albermarle Road, Tower Reserve Trench and Village Line. The latter was the communication trench which ran from Annequin to the front line, a distance of over two miles. This trench was paved most of the way with bricks. These, however, had sunk in the middle and made it very uneven for walking down. In wet weather this trench became a veritable river, and pumps had to be used constantly at numerous points. Water for washing purposes and for cooking was obtained from pumps which had been installed at certain points. I also had a good look at the machine gun positions which my Company would have to occupy the next time we came into the trenches. The gun positions were not in the trenches themselves, but were dug about ten yards in front of the trench. To reach the gun you had to pass down about 10 steps into the dug-out used by the gunners and then up several more steps which brought you to the platform on which the gun was mounted. In the day-time the gun positions were kept covered over by sheets of corrugated iron and uncovered at night. Each gun position was furnished with five large box respirators which were for the use of the gunners during gas attacks and were always kept in the positions. These box

respirators were only supplied to artillery and machine gunners, and were much larger and heavier than the one which was later given to all men serving in France. Another precaution for the safety of machine gunners against gas took the form of strips of blankets which were kept rolled up like a blind and during gas attacks were lowered over all the entrances to the dug-out. These blinds were kept damp with a special liquid which was sprayed on them once a week. Dinner was brought up prompt at 12 o'clock, and consisted of the usual "bully stew." In the afternoon we were free to pass the time as best we could; letter writing, card playing and sleeping were the principal ways of passing the afternoon away.

Not one shell had been fired all the morning in our vicinity, but in the afternoon a number fell close to the parapets of our trench. One of them burst on the parapet directly in front of the shelter I was occupying, and it was some minutes before the atmosphere was clear again. As soon as it began to get dusk we all had to stand-to again for one hour. The trenches swarmed with rats, and as it began to get dark they could be seen running about in droves on top of the trenches. Very few rats could be seen during the day-time. At stand-to we always had some sport killing them as they ran about the parapets. The dug-outs were the great rendezvous of these pests and caused "Tommy" much annoyance and discomfort when trying to get an odd hour's sleep.

After stand-down the usual routine for the night commenced; two hours on sentry and two hours sleep. I was not disturbed this night during the intervals of sentry duty. Trench mortar batteries, both ours and the Germans, were very active during the night, but none of the enemy's T.M.'s. dropped near our trench. It was on this night, Sunday, April 30th, that the 98th M.G. Company had its first casualties. A man named Fudge was killed and Sansoni, a dorky, was wounded; both belonged to C Section. These two casualties were caused by a whiz-bang hitting the shelter in which the men were sleeping. Fudge was buried in the Cambrin churchyard, and Sansoni was back in Blighty within a few days of the occurrence. The last two days of our spell in the trenches passed much the same as the first, but without any further casualties. On

Tuesday night, May 2nd, we came out of the trenches and marched back to our billets in Bethune.

## CHAPTER V.

### TRENCH WARFARE AT QUINCHY AND CAMBRIN—MAY-JUNE, 1916.

**T**HE first day after our return from the trenches we moved to some huts in the village of Beuvry, which was half-way between the trenches and the town of Bethune. Before the Company had to take over the positions in the trenches at the Brickfields and the Quinchy sector on May 5th we were all supplied with steel helmets. Quinchy was the sector in which we had spent our first three days with the South Wales Borderers. The Brickfields were so-called because of the trenches running through a large brickyard in which was about twenty huge brick-stacks. About two-thirds of these stacks were in the hands of the British, and the remaining stacks were held by the Germans. Dug-outs had been dug underneath all the stacks and were proof against any shell fire.

In order that each gun team could be relieved by a team of the same section, each section was divided into A and B sub-sections. Only three guns from each section—12 in all—were to be taken into the line, the remaining four being held in reserve. A sub-section of each of the sections had to take the first spell in the trenches with the guns. I was in B sub-section, and therefore had another two days in billets, but I had to accompany the first relief into the trenches so that I would be in a position to take a party of men to all the guns with the teams' rations and also to guide my half of the section to the positions when the time came for us to relieve our A sub-section. We left Beuvry early in the afternoon under a scorching hot sun. Our guns were conveyed in the limbers as far as the village of Annequin, but here all the guns, ammunition and spare parts had to be unloaded and each team had to carry its own gun and equipment the remainder of the way through the communication trench. Two men fainted before we had got half-way. It was no joke carrying a weight of about 60 lbs. in addition to a full service kit down a narrow trench about two miles in length with the sun blazing down upon

you. When the teams had got into their respective positions, No. R11 and 12 and "The Mill," I made my way back to the billets in Beuvry.

The following afternoon I had to take the ration party to the three teams with rations for the next day. Every afternoon the rations had to be taken into the trenches by the men stopping in Beuvry. On May 7th my half of the section went into the line and relieved our comrades. I was with the gun at R11 in Tower Reserve Trench. We stayed in the trenches for two days the same as the first party. The trench was heavily shelled by whiz-bangs on both days. When these spasms of straffing were taking place we did not venture too far from our dug-out. Beyond keeping that portion of the trench which ran past our position in good order we had nothing further to do with keeping the trenches in good condition. Each morning, after stand-to our gun had to be thoroughly cleaned, also the platform and dug-out. Now that we were in the trenches as machine gunners we had to prepare our own meals; we were entirely apart from the infantrymen. We had four men with each gun, and each team had its own supply of tea, sugar, bread, &c., and cooked their meals independent of one another.

The infantry occupying the trenches at this date was the 4th Battalion Suffolk Regiment (T). On the night of May 9th we were relieved and went back to Beuvry for two days. This time out of the trenches we were able to get a bath and a clean change of underclothing, which we were very much in need of. We were all dissatisfied with the teams being relieved every two days, so it was arranged that four days should be spent in the trenches and four days in the billets at Beuvry. My half of the section went back to the gun positions for the first four days on May 11th. During the afternoon of the 12th the Germans put down a very heavy barrage on our trenches which lasted for over an hour. This was the first intense bombardment that I had been under as yet. "C" Section, which was in the brickfields, had two men wounded on this day. It was during the night of May 12th that I first witnessed the blowing up of one of our land mines. These mines were bored from our trenches until they were directly underneath the Germans, and when the explosives had been fixed they were fired at a specific time. This was the work of the

Tunnelling Companies of the Royal Engineers. When the explosion took place you could feel the ground rock beneath you, and before the débris had even finished falling a sharp bombardment was opened by our artillery to prevent the Germans from occupying the crater. Later on in the night the enemy also fired a mine, but the boring had not been true, for it went off in No Man's Land. Men who had spent some time among these trenches told us that we should see mines going up two or three nights in the week. A considerable number of mines were blown up on this part of the front, and No Man's Land was one mass of mine craters.

The R.E.'s could be seen leaving Bethune for the trenches every night; they were taken in motor lorries as far as Annequin. From this point they had to make their way down the communication trench, each man carrying one or more pieces of timber used for propping up the tunnels. The following afternoon the gun team I was with had to move to the gun position at "The Mill." This position was in the ruins of what had once been a mill, and was situated at the junction of the village line communication trench and the front line, a distance of about 60 yards from the German trenches. A few days previous to us going into this position a trench mortar had blown a hole in one side of the shelter, which made it look none too secure. The gun position and shelter was connected to the trench by a tunnel about 10 yards long. This tunnel was only 4ft. high, and the first time I passed through it I went with my head against one of the beams which supported the roof, and although I was wearing a steel helmet at the time I was quite dazed for a few minutes. I was always very careful how I passed down it in the future. While we were in this position an amusing incident occurred. Myself and another member of the gun team were busy cooking our dinner over a brazier in the trench, when, without any warning, an explosion took place and blew our fire, cooking utensils, water and tins of Machonachie into the air. Being so close to the Germans we at first thought a bomb or grenade had fallen into the trench, but as no one was hurt and there being no fumes in the trench we had to look for some other cause. We discovered that one of the tins of vegetables had not been punctured when we put it on the brazier to get warm. Dinner was very late that day.

On May 15th we were relieved, and while we were back in the billets at Beuvry the 98th Machine Gun Company was reinforced by the Machine Gun Sections of the 4th Battalion Suffolk Regiment, 4th Battalion King's Liverpools, 1st Battalion Queen's and the 1st Battalion Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders. This made the Company considerably over strength, and a number of men from each section were sent down to the Machine Gun Corps. Base Depôt at Camiers. My section had a change of billets while we were out of the line this time, having moved into a loft about half a mile from the huts which the rest of the Company occupied. The railway was not very far behind our new billet, and about twice a week an armoured train used to come directly behind us and fire about six rounds or more from a 12in. gun. Every time the gun was fired the sound of falling glass could be heard, as the windows, which had not already been broken, were shattered to atoms by the concussion. Now that we had four days rest before returning to the trenches, we had to have so many parades each morning; these were usually a double round the village, gun drill, mechanism and gas drill. We were paid the sum of five francs each time we came out of the trenches, and the French people in the village who prepared suppers, consisting of two fried eggs, chipped potatoes, coffee and bread at one franc a time, did a good business on pay day. If the 4th Battalion King's Liverpools were also out of the line we were always sure of a good entertainment, as this Battalion happened to have some good talent in its ranks and could arrange a very good concert party. It was raining fast when we had to go into the trenches on the 19th, and the communication trench was so full of water in some places that we had to make our way over the top. This mode of going into the line was strictly forbidden; but as it was a case of going against orders or wading waist deep in water we chose the former. We had to take to the trench, however, after we had passed Harley Street as we were getting too close to the line for walking over the top in broad daylight. By the time we got to our position at "The Mill" we were soaked to the skin. This was the first time that I had been in the trenches in wet weather. The weather had been very hot since we landed in France, and we had been used to knocking about the trenches in our shirt sleeves. When we were in the line I usually went round in the after-

noon to the three gun positions collecting the men's letters, but I did not relish my job now that I had to wade shoe-top deep in water nearly all the way. I was very glad when our four days were up and had got back to our loft again, where we could make an attempt to get rid of the mud and clay with which we were caked.

On May 28th the 98th Infantry Brigade was relieved out of the line for a spell of 12 days. During the last few days in the trenches we had had several men wounded in the 98th M.G. Company. My Section Officer had been slightly wounded in the arm whilst firing one of the guns from the back of Tower Reserve Trench, and Lieut. Gill and his servant were both wounded on the 20th.

When the whole Company came out for this 12 days' rest we had to move into fresh billets, but did not go out of Beuvry.

Bethune was occasionally shelled by the Germans, and one day while we were out at rest a large number fell into the town. We could hear them about every half minute hurtling through the air over our heads, and looking in the direction of Bethune we could see where the shell had dropped. On June 11th we again took up our positions in the Brickfields and Quinchy sector, and carried on in the same old way as before. Towards the end of June my Section had to relieve a Section of the 99th M.G. Company, which was occupying the gun positions in the Cambrin sector just on the right of the La Bassée road. This sector was directly in front of the Annequin coal mines, the village of Cambrin being just behind the support trenches. A large number of shells had hit the church, but one big shell failed to explode, and after passing through the roof had buried itself in the wall on the north side. The nose of this shell could be seen poking out several inches on the outside of the wall. Since 1914 the churchyard had been used as a British military cemetery, and a lot of our men had been buried here. The infantry holding these trenches was the 1st Battalion Middlesex Regiment, and they were considerably under strength owing to such a large number of men having to be sent out of the trenches each day suffering from trench feet. This sector was in a much worse condition from the heavy rains than was the Quinchy sector. The three gun positions which we were holding were known as Arthur's Keep, Sim's Keep and Railway Keep. I was with

the gun team at Sim's Keep. Bombing raids had been taking place every night on this part of the front for the last week prior to the commencement of the great Somme Offensive, which was to take place on the 1st July. After one of these raids into the enemy's trenches the Germans would open out with an extra heavy dose of shell fire on our trenches, and I am sure our Keep got more than its share on the night of June 30th. The trench and gun platform were simply covered with fragments of shell and shrapnel, and one of our gunners had a very narrow escape from a nose-cap which flew from a bursting shell and just missed his head, burying itself on the trench top. Although we were many miles on the left of the Somme we could hear quite distinctly the rumble of our bombardment that was in progress. We remained in this sector until relieved on the 5th July. On Saturday, the 7th, we received orders to get ready for moving, and the remainder of our Company and the 33rd Division who were in the trenches were relieved that night. Just before they were relieved one man of my section was badly wounded in both hands and arms at the gun in the "Mill," caused by a German rifle grenade bursting in the trench.

During the ten weeks my Company had been in France we had had 14 casualties, one man killed, one officer and 12 men wounded. The 98th Infantry Brigade was on the move very early on Sunday morning and marched as far as Lillers. We rested in a barn for a few hours, and early in the afternoon my section had to entrain, along with the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders, with which Battalion we were to make the journey into the Somme district. There were no trucks for us machine gunners to travel in, and we had to make ourselves as comfortable as we could underneath the limbers on open wagons. At five o'clock we had commenced our journey into the Somme area, and much discussion was taking place among the men as to what the future had in store for us.

## CHAPTER VI.

BAZENTIN RIDGES—JULY 14TH—21ST, 1916.

(BATTLE OF THE SOMME.)

IT was a very cold journey that we made on the open trucks from the Las Bassée district into the Somme area on the night of July 8th—9th. At three o'clock in the morning our train pulled into the station of Amiens and we were only too glad to stretch our legs and get some warmth into our bodies. By four o'clock everything was off the train and we were marching through the town of Amiens, my section taking up the rear of the Argyles. For five hours we continued our march until we arrived at a small village where we were to rest until the whole of the 98th Infantry Brigade had reached this stage. The other three Battalions of Infantry and the three sections of my Company were following behind us at intervals of about two hours, the last party arriving about mid-day under a scorching hot sun, from the effects of which numerous men had to fall out of the ranks, and were picked up by the transport which brought up the rear.

Early the following morning we set out for the town of Corby, which place we arrived at early in the afternoon. We rested at Corby all the next day. It was here that we had to hand over our packs and soft caps to the Quartermaster, as the remainder of the journey had to be carried out in what was called "fighting order." This consisted only of our equipment, rifle, ground sheet, razor, soap, towel and socks and steel helmet. Corby was a very busy centre, and all day and night one continual stream of motors and transport of every description was passing through. The most conspicuous of these strings of motors were the Red Cross Ambulances, which passed through loaded with wounded in strings of 30 to 40.

After our day's respite we continued our marching towards the scene of the Great Offensive, and at the end of the first day's march from Corby we had got well within hear of our guns. At night-time we could distinctly see the flashes of our guns and shrapnel bursting in the air. We were very close to the scene of action now, and on the following day we marched over the trenches, which a fortnight ago had been the British front line. The last traces

of civilization had been passed on this our last day's march, and we were now in a wilderness of desolation and destruction. Not a single whole building could be seen for miles around, and in front of us as far as the eye could see stretched the field of battle, a veritable sea of fire, into which, and before many more hours had passed, the 98th Machine Gun Company was to be put to the test. We had halted in a narrow gorge beyond the battered village of Fricourt, just behind the valley which runs alongside of the Mametz Wood as far as the Bazentin-le-Petit Wood. From the top of this gorge, or ravine as it may be called, we had a magnificent view of the line, and as it began to get dusk we stood there fascinated at the spectacle spread out before us. The flashes from the hundreds of our guns of all calibres shewed out like sheets of fire in the darkening light, and a continual shower of German lights could be seen soaring over the trenches in one unending line. The German front line positions were denoted by the great masses of shells bursting all along the horizon, making it appear to be one long line of fire. When it had got quite dark I laid down along with the rest of my mates on the sloping side of the gorge with a ground sheet as a bed and equipment for a pillow, and in spite of the thundering noise, which only the concentration of huge masses of artillery can produce, I slept for several hours as if I was in a feather bed in a quiet corner of "Old Blighty." Between two and three o'clock in the morning (July 14th) I woke up almost frozen, as also had the majority of my comrades. It was still dark and our guns were still hammering at the German lines as hard as they could go. A large number of German shells, containing tear gas, were coming well over into our vicinity and we were all very soon rubbing our eyes, but this only made them worse. Tear shell gas is not poisonous, but it makes the eyes very sore and watery, thus preventing you from seeing with accuracy for any distance, and was used chiefly against artillery and machine gun batteries. Before it was light a party of cavalry, consisting of the Dragoon Guards and the Deccan Horse, passed by us on their way into the line to take part in the attack which was to commence in a few hours. The Deccan Horse were a fine set of Indian Cavalry, most of whom wore thick bushy beards and had their steel helmets pressed well over their turbans. Shortly after the cavalry had passed we had to fall in and move up to the concentration

point. Our limbers accompanied us only a short way before we had to unload our guns, &c., and carry them by hand.

We were now making our way down the Valley alongside the side of Mametz Wood, and the road we were traversing was littered from end to end with dead bodies, both of men and horses. They appeared to have been here several days, and the stench from them was almost unbearable. When we had got nearly to the end of the valley, which, by the way, was better known to our men as "The Valley of Death," we came across the remainder of the 98th Infantry Brigade, and rested here until the time for the attack. It was beginning to get very light now, and our artillery calmed down as if by a given signal: the calm before the storm. Presently I heard the whine of a shell, followed by an explosion and a shower of shrapnel as it burst immediately overhead, and then came a regular hurricane of shrapnel shells all bursting in the vicinity of our collecting point. Shrapnel was soon raining down upon us like a shower of hailstone, and we had to take to the shell holes and get what little protection they offered. A number of the infantry were wounded, but my Company escaped without any loss. It was now time to move up to the front line, and the three battalions of infantry and three sections of my Company who had to form the attacking party, began to go forward. My section was in reserve with the 4th Battalion King's Liverpools, and thus we did not take a very active part in this, the second stage of the "Great Push" as the Blighty newspapers had chosen to call the Somme Offensive. We were the last to move forward, and by this time the artillery, which we had now left behind us, was barking and thundering as hard as the gunners could go. As the bombardment got well under way the noise became one great roll of thunder and the air above our heads was alive with thousands of shells, from 18-pounder to 15-inch, speeding to the German positions on their mission of death and destruction. Shortly after my section moved off a German 5.9 shell dropped in the middle of a Company of infantry which was moving up not many yards on our left, killing or maiming a large number of men. We eventually came to a halt under a bank close in the rear of the Bazentin-le-Petit Wood, and were told to dig in as we were to remain here until further orders. I was doing runner for my Section; my duty was to take any messages that it

was necessary my Section Officer should send to Company Headquarters, any other section of the Company, or to any of the Battalions in our area, and to accompany the Officer wherever he went. Nearly all the men in my section had to go back for the remainder of the ammunition that had been left behind at the point where the limbers had been unloaded. On the return of these men I had to take a report back to Company Headquarters which was in a dug-out on the edge of Mametz Wood, about 10 minutes walk from our reserve positions. It seemed strange to me not to have any communication trenches to walk down, but the only trenches that were in existence were the fire trenches, short pieces of trenches dug by men in reserve, and old German trenches battered out of all recognition as such. The German artillery was now putting down a tremendous barrage between the woods of Mametz and Bazentin, the whole ground being alive with bursting shells.

About 200 yards at the back of our position was a ridge, the slope of which was surmounted by what was called Catterpillar Wood, and the Germans were searching every corner of it with heavy shells, pieces of which were flying back and striking the bank behind which we were digging our trench. Groups of cavalry were now returning from the direction of High Wood by the road which runs between the villages of Bazentin-le-Petit and Bazentin-le-Grand.

Later in the day I again went to Company Headquarters and from here I learnt that the remainder of the Company had sustained very heavy casualties in the village of Bazentin and in the Cemetery. The Battalion stretcher bearers were now very busy carrying the seriously wounded men from the forward positions to the advanced dressing station, which was in a quarry about half-a-mile down the Mametz Valley, and a continual string of men, who were not so badly wounded as their comrades on the stretchers, were making their way in groups as fast as their wounds would allow.

It was a very common occurrence to see German unwounded prisoners carry our wounded Tommies out of the line.

The men of the R.A.M.C. did not carry the wounded from the front line and supports, this was done by the Battalion stretcher bearers, but the men of the Medical Corps usually formed a relay post half-way to the dressing stations, and even occasionally, when specially asked for,

would supply stretcher parties for the front line and support. Heavy casualties among the Field Artillery, however, kept the R.A.M.C. very busy. At dusk one of our limbers brought the Company's rations to within a few hundred yards of my Section, from which place we had to carry them to our trench and afterwards to the sections in the front line. Towards midnight myself and half-a-dozen other men set off with the rations for the section holding the line in the vicinity of the Cemetery, and most of the way led down a narrow country lane which was littered from end to end with dead Tommies and Germans. We searched about for a long time without coming across any of the Section, and at last, under a heavy shell fire we made our way back to the reserve line. As soon as I got back I laid myself down and secured two or three hours sleep before stand-to. Before it got light several men belonging to the Section we had failed to find came down and took their rations back with them. The day went very slow, and we had nothing much to do beyond giving our guns a wipe over and improving our trench. I made several journeys to Company Headquarters in the course of the day. All through the day, however, we were continually harrassed by German shell fire, and many 5.9's dropped too close for my liking. Late in the afternoon a party of us went to the far end of Mametz Wood in search for water. We went into every nook and corner of "Death's Valley" but without finding a single drop, and several water carts that we came across had been hit by shells and blown to pieces. We did find, however, a tin of Army biscuits which we were only too pleased to carry back with us. Our rations just now were very poor indeed, consisting only of one loaf of bread for ten men, a small piece of cheese, a tin of bully and one pint of water each. The water supply, of course, did not allow for the luxury of a wash and shave; this had to be dispensed with. When the ration limber came up at night it was accompanied by the water cart from which we were able to replenish our water supply.

Early the next morning the Germans opened out with a colossal bombardment of huge shells on the whole of the valley stretching behind us. These shells came over at the rate of six a minute, and the "Valley of Death" was only too true keeping up its grim title. The Reserve Brigade of my Division were driven out of the trenches in which they were resting, but not before they had suffered very heavy

casualties, and our Field Artillery situated in the bombarded area were also in a sorry plight, half-a-dozen batteries being very soon put out of action. A lot of transport, chiefly artillery ammunition limbers, were also caught in the hurricane of shells, and I saw more than one receive direct hits from shells as they were galloping down the valley in a vain attempt to get clear. Many of the shells also dropped short, failing to clear the bank behind which we had dug our trench, and we sustained some severe shocks. One also dropped amongst some of the King's Liverpools a few yards on the right of my Section, several of whom were killed or wounded.

In the afternoon I had to accompany my Section Officer to the far end of the valley on a visit to one of the Infantry Battalions in reserve. We had to wait until the shelling had abated somewhat before we could venture out, and when we did set off we had to keep well to one side to be clear of the shells that were still coming over. Later on I paid a visit to Company Headquarters and found them all very busy filling sand-bags and strengthening their dug-outs and bivouacs as several shells had dropped here and destroyed some of the shelters. In the evening a tall observation ladder was dragged just behind our position and an officer climbed to the top in an endeavour to spot the German heavy battery which was causing all the havoc in our reserve line. This battery ceased firing after it got dark, and our observation officer must have spotted the guns, for on the following day not one of these heavy shells came over. The German 5.9 shell, however, could at any time of the day or night always be heard or seen bursting in our line.

Early on the morning of July 17th my Section had to take over some positions in the direction of Bazentin-le-Grand, and to reach them we had to go round by the back of Catterpillar Wood. This wood and the ground at the back was always subjected to a heavy shell fire and was one maze of shell holes. Only the stumps of the trees remained, the trunks and branches having been blown to atoms and strewn in all directions. The Germans had had some fearful casualties round here—every shell crater for a stretch of nearly a mile contained one or more of their dead. Numerous British soldiers were also laid about in this area, and at one of the gun positions we had to bury a youth of 19 in a shell hole at the back of the trench before the gun could be

mounted. When the section was in position I had to go back in company with the Sub-Section Officer to our old trench, and we got back just as Jerry was giving the bank a good straffing. This locality was now continually under heavy shell fire, and before night we were forced to move away to the left of it.

In the afternoon I made a trip up to the Section and was caught in some heavy shell fire at the back of Catterpillar Wood, which made me get a move on. At night-time I always made a pillow of my box respirator, and during the night of July 17th and 18th I must have been sleeping extra sound, and some unscrupulous comrade-in-arms had very kindly appropriated my respirator and rations for the next day which were in a sandbag laid at the back of my head. The next morning I had to set out on a scrounging expedition to secure another box respirator, for although I still had the ordinary gas mask used by the infantry, this large respirator formed part of the equipment of a gunner in either the Artillery or Machine Gun Corps., and was also much more comfortable to wear than the mask. During the day we received orders to be ready to relieve a section of guns that night in the front line. The remainder of the Section came back to the bank in the afternoon and we all laid down to get a few hours sleep before the time for moving. Towards evening the bombardments increased in fury and our trench fairly rocked from the concussion of bursting shells. About mid-night a guide arrived from the front line to conduct us to the machine gun posts. When all the men had picked up their loads we set off at a slow pace across the open ground between the woods of Mametz and Bazentin-le-Petit. I was in front of the Section along with the guide and officer, and owing to it being a very dark night we had to be continually shouting out directions to the men walking behind us. These are some of the directions used by troops walking in Indian file from one position to another:—Shell-hole on the right (or left), wire underfoot (or overhead), keep well to one side lot of dead bodies, wide trench jump well over, and enquiries to make sure no one is left behind.

Arriving at the far side of Bazentin-le-Petit Wood, our guide failed us; he said he was lost and had not the faintest idea as to his whereabouts or which way he should turn to get to his Section. Shells were now coming over pretty thick, including gas shells, which were polluting the whole

atmosphere. The Officer and myself made an endeavour to find the machine gunners whom we had to relieve, and while walking down an old German trench we had a narrow escape from a gas shell which burst only two or three yards away from us. Gas was very thick in the neighbourhood now, and we had to wear our gas respirators. We returned to the men without having come across the gunners whose places we had to take. My mates were now giving our useless guide a severe rating for having got us into such a mess. For over an hour we searched about without coming across the Section we had to relieve, and about four o'clock we all made our way back to Company Headquarters, where we were given some directions that would take us to the teams we had to relieve. The positions were at the far left-hand corner of Bazentin-le-Petit Wood, and we arrived there just as it was getting daylight on the morning of July 19th. If our guide had just turned to the right at the point where he said he was lost, less than ten minutes' walk would have taken us to the Section. Being on very high ground we had a good view of the line running to the left, and the heavy shrapnel shells bursting simultaneously with groups of percussion shells on our trenches about 500 yards away presented a fine picture in the early morning light. This part of the line where we had our positions was being held by the 1st Battalion Middlesex Regiment, and they had had a lot of men killed in the shallow roadway which ran down the side of the wood behind our guns. We had not been here long before high explosive shells began to rain on this corner of the wood and continued the whole of the day, but not one landed on the trench just where we were. Further in the Wood, however, numerous infantrymen were wounded. In this same piece of trench as we machine gunners were two stretcher bearers of the 1st Battalion Middlesex Regiment. During the last twenty-four hours or more the stretcher bearers of this unit had been kept hard at work attending to the many cases of seriously wounded men down the roadway running alongside this Wood, which was being drenched with an incessant and murderous shell fire. These brave men had one by one fallen victims to the German shell fire, until at last all had been either killed or wounded with the exception of these two. One of these men had now passed the limit of his powers of endurance, and while standing by us during a particularly heavy shower of

explosives he utterly lost control of himself and was soon bordering on the verge of hysterics, a truly pitiable plight. Crying like a child he knelt down in the trench and prayed for deliverance from the dreadful hail of life-destroying missiles. This man was later taken by his comrade further along the trench, which was the last occasion that I saw him. I have no doubt but that he eventually succumbed to that terrible complaint shell shock. In spite of the bombardment one of our gunners slept for several hours on one of the gun platforms in the open. A heavy downpour of rain in the afternoon filled part of the trench with water, and in the other part of it we sank down in several inches of mud.

The shelling slackened down at night time, and by taking it in turns we managed to get a couple of hours sleep each before daylight. At daybreak the straffing commenced again and was more fierce than on the previous day. I was busy cleaning my rifle at about 11 o'clock when a shell burst just over the trench and I felt a sharp pain in my leg which caused me to drop the bolt of my rifle into the mud. On examining my left leg I found a small piece of shrapnel sticking in; it had only made a small wound, however, owing to the folds of my puttees and trousers, which had evidently broken the force of it. Early in the afternoon I went down to Company Headquarters, and as the whole of our Division was to be relieved that night I did not return to the front line but remained with one or two men of my Section who had been stopping in the reserve line. After I had delivered my message I had a walk down as far as the Advanced Dressing Station to have my leg dressed. While we were waiting for the Company to be relieved one of the men had a shave; this man also gave me one, the first we had had for eight days. As soon as it was dark the whole of the Company was relieved and moved to some trenches at the far end of the valley. The whole of the night we had to wear our gas helmets owing to the Germans straffing us with gas shells.

On July 21st, our last day in the line, my Section had its first and only casualty since we had come into action on the 14th July. Some heavy shells were bursting on the road about 100 yards away and a stray piece of shell hit one of the Section in the face, making a very nasty wound. The total number of casualties sustained by my Company during the

last seven days was about 50, including one officer, who died from gas poisoning, about six men killed and the remainder wounded. In the afternoon, July 21st, we moved out of the danger zone for a few days rest.

## CHAPTER VII.

### HIGH WOOD—AUGUST 5TH TO 17TH (BATTLE OF THE SOMME), 1916.

**A**FTER being relieved the 33rd Division came out of the line for about 12 days, and which my Co. spent in a small village about 10 kilos behind the line. Here we were reinforced by about 60 men from the Base, which more than made up for the casualties. The first day or two in billets was spent in getting rid of all the traces of our spell in the line, and one day was set aside for bathing and the washing of our underclothing. We enjoyed lovely weather the whole time we were out at rest, but this soon passed over, and on Sunday (August 5th) we had to again prepare for the fray. In the morning my Company attended a drum-head service held by the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders, after which we returned to our billets, had dinner, and then paraded ready to march off again to the scene of the Great Offensive. It was a very hot day and the dust and sand which laid on the roads to a depth of two inches or more rose up in clouds as we marched along. Four hours marching brought us once more into the fire zone, and we came to a halt in the reserve line in the very centre of our artillery which was still thundering and barking as hard as ever. My Company occupied a trench not far from where my Section had laid in reserve in July, and we were to remain here for the next six days as the whole of the 98th Infantry Brigade was in reserve. Beyond having sentries on duty at night time to give warning in case of gas coming over we had no duty to perform and spent most of our time writing letters, playing cards and sleeping.

Our aeroplanes were very busy in the Somme area and were complete masters of the air. Many a duel in the air attracted our attention, and I recollect on one occasion a duel between a German plane and a British plane became so exciting that even the artillery became so engrossed in the fight that not a single gun fired in our vicinity for about

ten minutes. Everybody and everything suddenly became silent, and all eyes were turned upwards to watch the two aeroplanes manœuvring round one another in their efforts to get master of the situation. Eventually the British plane got above the German, and with a sharp burst of machine gun fire chased it towards the earth. Long before it reached the ground, however, the German pilot, who had evidently been fatally hit, lost control of his machine and it fell with a crash into the Wood of Bazentin-le-Petit. The victory of our airman over the German was the cause of great cheering, which travelled from the front line trench right to the rear, and was also immediately heralded by the clash and roar of our artillery as they re-opened the bombardment with even more vigour than before.

During the last two days that we spent in reserve our trench became the target for a German 5.9 battery, and on August 10th one man was killed on the edge of Mametz Wood. He was one of two brothers in D Section, and they were standing together outside the trench when a shell burst in front of them, a piece of which hit one of them in the head, killing him instantly.

On the night of August 11th we had to move up to the front line in Foureaux Wood, always referred to by the British Troops as "High Wood." This Wood, which stood on very high ground, was about half-a-mile in front of the village of Bazentin-le-Grand, and heavy fighting had taken place during the past fortnight for the possession of it, but the Germans still clung to three-parts of it. The 33rd Division was now holding the right-hand corner of the Wood, and my Brigade, the 98th, was to relieve the troops holding the front line and close supports. As soon as it was dusk we commenced to make our way down the valley, passed the village of Bazentin-le-Grand, and then up a communication trench, which took us right up to the wood. The gun team I was with had to take up a position on the right of the wood, midway between the front line and the close support line, and our only shelter and protection from shell fire was a ditch not three feet deep. With it being dark when we came into the line we could not see very well what our position was like, but when it got light we were surprised to find that we were practically in the open and could not leave our gun position in the day-time unless we crawled on our hands and knees. The first day passed very slow, and

we were glad when it got to evening and we could stand up and stretch our legs without fear of being spotted. At stand-to our Section Officer paid us a visit. This was his first view of the position, and he there and then gave us orders to vacate it and mount our gun on the parapet of the support trench. We at once commenced to remove our gun, &c., which was completed in about 15 minutes. It was now quite dark, and before we had time to sort out our gun equipment which we had laid in a heap in the bottom of the trench heavy rifle fire opened out just inside the wood on our left, and at the same time a heavy barrage of German shells enveloped our trenches. The rifle fire became heavier and the German shells were literally raining down on our front line and supports, the bright flashes from which lit up the whole of our trenches and the wood adjoining. Our team was in a fix, and until we had ascertained exactly what was occurring we could only wait for developments. The British S.O.S. Signal had not been sent up, and thus, even if our gun had been mounted we could not have fired, as our orders were to fire only at the signal of the S.O.S. and at visible parties of the enemy. While we were waiting and watching for further developments a whiz-bang burst with a vivid flash and loud explosion in the centre of our team of five gunners, blowing us off our feet and half blinding and choking us with the fumes, earth, &c. A minute or more elapsed before we had fully realised what had happened, and on looking round at one another we missed one of our comrades called Humphreys. The trench was half-filled with earth and I climbed over it to see if he was further down the trench, but they called me back before I had got many yards as one of my mates had noted a hand poking out of the heap of earth, and on digging it away we found our missing man quite dead. He had received the full force of the shell, and his body was riddled with pieces of shrapnel which had completely smashed his back and arms, whilst another big piece had hit him in the head. The bombardment lasted for nearly an hour, when it suddenly subsided as quickly as it had commenced. Later on we learnt that it had been caused by a patrol of ours coming in contact with a patrol of Germans, and the latter signalled for artillery support. As soon as it began to get light we searched about for some old bags in which to wrap the body of our dead comrade. We then dug a hole in a shell crater at the back of the

trench and, carrying him out of the gun position, we buried him, one of our officers who happened to come past at the time reading the burial service over his grave. I fully expected to hear some bullets come whizzing about our ears as we were less than 100 yards from the German trench, but everything was quiet. This man Humphreys had only left England in July and joined the Company while we were out at rest, and this was the first time he had been in the trenches. When rations came up at night we got another man to replace our casualty; another one fresh from Blighty. During the first three days that we spent in the trenches in High Wood we experienced several heavy bombardments, and we had one man wounded in the afternoon of the 13th. On the night of the 13th, while one of these straffs was in progress, a shell struck a dump of Very Lights about 50 yards down our trench, and for about 10 minutes we witnessed a fine display of fireworks. We were relieved for a spell of 24 hours on the 14th August, prior to the opening of an attack on High Wood on August 16th, and we went back about 800 yards to a trench in front of the ruins of what had once been the village of Bazentin-le-Grand. This trench was heavily shelled on the 15th, and the fresh man who had joined us three days ago was wounded in the leg and had to be taken to the Advanced Dressing Station. While we were having this short spell in reserve my gun team's rations went astray, and as I had an idea that the Section lying to the right of Bazentine-le-Grand had got them, I took a trip as far as their trench, which was about 20 minutes' walk from where my Section was. I found my team's rations with this Section, and I was also informed that our people had got information of a gas shell barrage which the Germans were going to place on our reserve position at a specific time. It was very near the time now, so I commenced making my way back as quickly as I could. All the infantry in the trench I had to traverse had their gas masks on their heads rolled up above the eyes so that as soon as the first gas shell came over the mask could be rolled down over the face and tucked inside the tunic without any loss of time. This method of being prepared against a gas-shell bombardment was generally adopted by the troops in front line positions on the Somme battlefield. By the time I reached Bazentin-le-Grand the music had commenced, and I still had about 400 yards to go. Gas shells were bursting

all round now, so I had to put on my gas mask to finish the remainder of my journey. I found all my mates with their heads securely encased in their gas masks.

Early on the morning of the 16th we had to prepare for moving up to the front line again in readiness to take part in the attack on the Wood. Guns were all thoroughly cleaned, and each of us had to carry in our haversacks two Mill's bombs, flare, &c. The 98th Infantry Brigade (including the 4th King's Liverpools, 4th Suffolks, a Battalion of Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders, and the 98th Machine Gun Company), was to make the attack, with the 1st Division taking part on our left. During the last two or three nights working parties had been cutting "T" shaped trenches from the front line out into "No Man's Land," and it was to the heads of these trenches that we had to get our guns into position at the commencement of the attack and cover the storming infantrymen with our fire. By mid-day all the attacking troops had concentrated in the front line and close support trenches, and were patiently waiting for the hour of the attack, which was to commence at 3.30 in the afternoon. As the time crept near many of the men could be seen anxiously looking at their watches and informing their mates how many more minutes there were to go before the clash and thunder of the artillery would open out for the attack to commence. The gun team I was with was waiting in the close support trench to the right of the wood along with the 4th King's Liverpools, and one of their Sergeants who was talking to us told us that he knew he would be killed before the day was out. It was quite a common occurrence in the trenches for men to predict their coming death during an attack. (Later in the day I learned that this Sergeant was killed a few minutes after the opening of the attack.) About ten minutes before zero (the time of the assault) the infantry commenced moving into the front line, and we also picked up our gun and equipment and made our way to the front line in the Wood. We had just reached the Wood when an aeroplane flying overhead commenced blowing a horn, which was the signal for our artillery to open their nerve-racking bombardment on the German positions. The German gunners lost no time in answering our artillery, and in less than a minute the trench my mates and myself were passing down was being blown out of all resemblance to a trench. We had just got to the front line

trench when a shell dropped almost at our feet killing two men and slightly wounding a third. One man was also buried and another suffered from shell shock. This catastrophe to our team left only myself and another man to carry on. The attack was now in progress, and as it was impossible for just the two of us to carry the gun, tripod, spare parts and ammunition to the position we should have gone to in "No Man's Land," one of our officers gave us orders to take the gun into the close support trench and mount it in the position we had manned a few days ago. Meanwhile the attack had proved a complete failure. The Germans had been fully prepared for the attack, and as soon as our men showed themselves in the open the enemy opened out a fierce fire with machine guns and rifles, and the few men who did get through were assailed by a shower of hand grenades. Our casualties were very heavy indeed, and the trenches, which had been blown in by shell fire every few yards, were choked with our killed and badly wounded men. The slightly wounded men were making their way out of the line as fast as they could. The few battalion stretcher bearers that remained could do very little in the way of carrying the scores of men who were lying in the trenches suffering from most fearful shell and bullet wounds to the Advanced Dressing Station about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles further back. A special request had to be made to the Brigade Field Ambulance for a strong party of stretcher bearers to be sent to the front line trenches in High Woo. It was a very common thing for badly wounded men to lie about for one, two and even three days and nights before being picked up and taken out of the line. A strict rule when in the trenches was that no man, other than stretcher bearers, could pick up a badly wounded man and take him out of the line to a Dressing Station. Two infantrymen were lying not five yards away from our gun position with shell wounds in the back as big as a man's fist, and one of them was laid there 48 hours later. The other three gun teams of my Section were successful in reaching the heads of the T-shaped trenches cut out from the front line, and they held these outposts after the attack had proved a failure until the Brigade was relieved on the morning of the 19th August.

During the attack these teams had sustained several casualties, including three men killed. One Corporal had

been shot through the head by a sniper while looking round to take his bearings. Altogether my Section had had five men killed and several wounded while the attack had been in progress. Throughout the next two days that we were in High Wood the German artillery was very active, and did still more damage to our trenches and the occupants. Trench mortars were also very troublesome; they fell all round our gun position each night. It took the stretcher bearers three nights to clear the trenches of the men who had been badly hit. I saw several cases of men suffering from severe shell shocks, and in every case it took four or five bearers to take one out of the trenches. When a man is suffering from shell shock proper it takes several men to keep hold of him; they usually foam at the mouth and are crying and sobbing most of the time.

On the night of the 18th word was brought up that the Brigade was being relieved that night, but it was not until about six o'clock on the morning of the 19th that my mate and myself got relieved. Our transport limbers had been brought close up to Bazentin-le-Grand, and we were only too glad to get our heavy loads off our shoulders as it had been very hard work walking from the front line. As soon as the whole of the Company was relieved we marched back about four miles to obtain a short rest. Since August 5th the Company had had over 50 men killed or wounded. The number of men killed had been very heavy during this period.

---

DEDICATED

TO THE MEMORY OF

MY DEAR BROTHER,

JOHN WILLIAM RUSSELL

(76th Field Company, Royal Engineers),

WHO

ENLISTED ON SEPTEMBER 19th, 1914.

PROCEEDED OVERSEAS (FRANCE) ON AUGUST 22nd, 1915.

WAS INVALIDED HOME ON JULY 17th, 1918.

DIED IN CONNAUGHT MILITARY HOSPITAL, ALDERSHOT, ON  
DECEMBER 8th, 1919 (AGED 25 YEARS).

---

*Pro Patria.*

## CHAPTER VIII.

I JOIN THE 13TH COMPANY AT LEUZE WOOD (SOMME, SEPTEMBER, 1916.)

ON arriving at the transport lines, which were just clear of shell fire, on the morning of August 19th, we first of all had breakfast, followed by a good many hours sleep, to make up for some of the hours sleep we had missed whilst in the trenches. In the afternoon we all went for a bathe to an improvised bath about a mile from where we had our bivouacs, which was followed by the removal of our numerous days' growth of beard. Our clothes also required a great deal of brushing, and we were all sadly in need of clean underclothing, but the latter was not to be had. The next two days were spent in overhauling the guns and ammunition and cleaning up generally.

In the afternoon of the 21st about 20 men, including myself, had to pack up our few goods and chattels and proceed to Albert railway station, where we had to entrain for the Machine Gun Corps Base Dépôt at Camiers, near Etaples. Albert was about 4 miles away, and to get to the station we had to go through the centre of the town where most of the damage caused by German shells had been done, and when we passed the battered church I looked up and saw the remarkable point of this war-scarred building. The Virgin of Albert, a statue which surmounted the top of the church, had been struck by a shell and was now hanging down over the roadway to all appearances without any support. (This was finally blown down during the German offensive of March, 1918.) On arriving at the station we had not long to wait before our train pulled in (cattle trucks of course), and we were very soon increasing the distance between ourselves and the firing line. The train kept jogging along very slow but sure towards the coast throughout the night. Speed was not one of the troop train's speciality, and daybreak found us not so many miles behind the line. Stoppages on the line were very frequent, and these gave us ample opportunity of obtaining boiling water from the engine for the purpose of making ourselves a drink of tea. Towards evening we arrived at the station of Abbeville (the Machine Gun Corps Transport Base), and here our train was shunted into a siding where it was to stay until next morning. A large canteen which was situated on the station kept open

nearly all the night, and we were able to buy tea, biscuits, cake, etc. At 10 o'clock in the morning the train was shunted on to the main line and we again resumed our journey, but it was not until early in the morning of the 24th of August that we arrived at Etaples. We had a walk now of about 5 miles to our Base at Camiers, which we reached shortly before mid-day. Our party was now split up, and the men who had only been in France a week or two were informed that they would be required for a draft, which was to proceed to the line the next day. Then those who had been out over one month but under three were allotted to a tent and told that they would probably be required for a draft in a week's time. The remainder of us who had been out over three months were told that we should not be called upon to join a draft for two or more weeks. After being shown to our tent we all trooped to the dining-room for some dinner. Having had dinner a party of us made our way to one of the several Recreation Huts, which were dotted about the camp, to be out of the way of any inquisitive Orderly Sergeant who might be prowling round the tents in the hopes of coming across one or two men who happened not to be on any parade and nail them for a fatigue party. Shortly after tea we were supplied with two blankets each, and none of us were very late that night before we had got out of our more or less dirty khaki the first time for about four months, and were comfortably lying between our pair of blankets. Only those who have spent several months without a bed can realize the delight of a soldier, who, during a campaign, has the chance of being able to undress and roll himself in a couple of blankets, even though he has to lie on the bare tent boards.

At nine o'clock next morning we had to go to the bath house, where we were able to get a really good bath, after which we had to hand our khaki in for it to be fumigated. I felt very fresh after my bathe and had got into the once more clean clothing. For the next ten days we had to be on parade every morning at 8.30. Nearly all our parades consisted of gun drill, firing on the ranges with both machine gun and rifle, and an occasional half-hour's infantry drill. On one occasion when we went to the range, which was about one mile from the camp, gas masks had to be worn whilst the guns were being got ready for firing and also during the firing, and then we had to carry the guns right

back to the camp still wearing our gas masks. We also had a demonstration of the various gases being used on the Western Front, and we had to pass through a gas chamber and through a trench filled with tear shell gas (as though we had not already had enough of the real thing during the last few weeks on the Somme).

During my short rest at the Base I came across one of my old squad mates of the 3rd East Yorks. He had come out to France with the M.G.C. a fortnight before I did, and from him I learnt that most of my former comrades had either been killed or wounded on the Somme. During the second week after arriving at the Base we had most of our equipment and clothing replaced by new, and from this I gathered that we should very soon be included in a draft to proceed to the line again, and in the afternoon of Friday, September 4th, we all had to appear on a draft parade. I was detailed to join the 13th Company along with seven other men, only one of whom had been out before. My late mates of the 98th Company had nearly all been detailed to join the 12th Company. I said good-bye to the Base Camp at nine o'clock on the following morning. Our packs and equipment had been put into a motor lorry to be taken on to the station, so we were able to make our way to Etaples station in comfort. Shortly after 12 o'clock the train moved out of the station, and I was once more en route for the scene of the great offensive.

Before leaving the camp I had ascertained that the 13th Machine Gun Company, which belonged to the 13th Infantry Brigade, 5th Division, was in action on the Somme, and I did not at all like the idea of again making the acquaintance of the Somme battlefield. As is always the case when returning to the firing line, the train travelled much quicker and with fewer stops than when I came down the line, and at dawn on Tuesday morning, September 8th, the long line of Observation Balloons, the eyes of the Army, could be clearly seen, and the booming of our heavy guns could be heard despatching forth their projectiles of death and destruction. At mid-day we arrived at Mericourt, a small town about four miles south of Albert, and here we had to get off the train and complete the remainder of our journey of five or six miles to the transport lines of the 13th M.G. Company on foot. We reached our destination early in the afternoon. The Company had only gone into the line at

Leuze Wood (this Wood was always called "Lousy Wood" by Tommy Atkins) on Sunday night, and was expected to remain in for another three or four days. Just as we had finished having our tea a German high velocity shell, fired from a long range gun, burst about 50 yards in front of us, and this was followed by a second shell which burst about the same distance behind us, and I fully expected another one to come hurtling more or less near to make us feel a little uncomfortable, especially after just arriving from a fortnight's rest in a Base Camp. No more shells came over in our vicinity after these two, however. Before it got dark we had obtained several sheets from the transport with which we made a bivouac to shelter us for the night.

The next day, September 9th, we had to prepare for going into the line in the afternoon to join the Company. We left in company with the ration limbers at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Leuze Wood was almost at the extreme end of the British line, and to reach it we had a long tramp past Trone's Wood and to the right of Guillemont village, and eventually we arrived at the Headquarters of the Company, which was in a trench about half-a-mile from Leuze Wood. Long before we had reached our destination shells had commenced to drop very close to the track down which our little party was making its way. Numbers of dead soldiers, both German and British, lay scattered about the countryside and the shell-shattered woods. On reaching Headquarters the C.O. (Captain Cutting) enquired of each one of us whether we had previously seen service in France, and were told to make ourselves as comfortable as we could in a part of the trench allotted to us. The guns in the line only had a complement of five men per gun, the remainder of the men, numbering about 20, being kept at Company Headquarters for carrying up the rations and water, and to replace casualties as they occurred among the men serving at the guns. Myself and the men who had just arrived were not troubled at all until the next afternoon, when four men had to take water to one of the Sections. Our trench was heavily shelled in the afternoon, and one shell landed in the trench and destroyed a shelter used by our party.

The British Artillery still maintained the fierceness of its bombardments as in the months of July and August, and the shell fire of our French Allies just to the right was

none the less fierce. Half of the Company was to be relieved the following night, September 11th, and all of us at Headquarters were told to be ready to proceed to the front line trench and help to carry out the guns and ammunition. We left for the front line in company with the gunners of the relieving unit as soon as it was dark. It was a very black night, and when the brilliant German "Verey Lights" soared into the air they lit up every corner of our front line and support trenches and gave the shell shattered woods a ghostly appearance. As we were making our way down a much battered trench along the edge of Leuze Wood a German "whiz-bang battery" opened out a sharp and fierce fire on us, and the ground being littered with barbed wire, telephone wires and cases of bombs and ammunition over which every man was stumbling, added to the confusion and also caused much swearing on the part of most of the men. On entering the Wood we came to the Headquarters of the Section holding the front line, and here we were joined by several men of the 13th Company who were to guide us to the gun teams which were to be relieved. When the party I was with, consisting of two gun teams, had been joined by our guides, we commenced making our way through the Wood. Our progress was very slow and difficult, as large trees, which had been blown down by shell fire, were lying about in all directions, and huge shell craters also barred our path at every few yards. German machine gunners were also sweeping the Wood with their fire. After picking our way through for about 20 minutes we came almost to the far side of the Wood, and here our guides became uneasy, and on proceeding a little farther they were quite certain that they had missed their way. One of the guides went off by himself to try and find the gun teams that should be relieved, and a few seconds later we were startled by a "Verey Light" which was fired towards us from a point about 30 yards away, and while the Wood was still under its glare a long burst of machine gun fire swept the Wood where we were standing, making every man of us drop into the nearest shell hole. The guide had not been absent many minutes before he returned with the good news that he had found the gun positions. At present we were sat midway between our own front line and the Germans; another 20 or 30 yards would have taken us right into the Bosche lines. Retracing our steps for about 30 yards we came to a roughly dug

trench, the British front line, and another minute or two's walk along this trench brought us to the gunners we had been seeking. The gunners of No. 4 Section 13th. M.G. Company did not waste any time in dismounting their guns, and it was only a matter of about five minutes before we were ready to proceed on the homeward journey. The men who had made the advance into this Wood, and those who had been holding it for the last two or three days, had had very severe casualties, and our dead, lying in groups all along the back of the front line could be counted in dozens. Leuze Wood, or Lousy Wood, had the appearance of a veritable hecatomb. We made our way out of the Wood as quickly as possible, and on gaining the valley at the back of the Wood we struck off to the right instead of to the left, thinking it would be a shorter route back to Company Headquarters. We were sadly in the wrong, however, for it took us at least twice as long as when I came up with the relief party. Eventually we came to our Headquarters just about dead beat and quite ready for a nap. An issue of rum was at once served out to us. This was only the second time that I had taken my issue of rum, having taken it for the first time when in High Wood during August. The rest of the Company was not coming out of the line until the night of the 13th, but No. 4 Section, which had just been relieved, had to remain at Company Headquarters until the other three Sections, which were still in the line, were also relieved. A number of tanks, or "caterpillars" as they were first called by the British Tommy, had been brought to a point about 250 yards behind our trench, safely screened from the eyes of the enemy. These new engines of war were going to be used for the first time on the morning of September 15th, 1916, when another phase of the great Somme Offensive was to commence. The 1st Cavalry Division was also going to take part in this fresh attack, and special tracks were being marked out with white tape for the guidance of the horsemen. The 5th Division was not taking any part in this attack as we would all be out of the line on the 14th for a rest.

Just as it was coming in dusk in the evening of the 13th I was standing at the back of the trench in company with several other members of the Company when a field gun, situated about 500 yards in the rear, fired a shell which burst prematurely, killing two horses, only 30 yards behind us.

Premature bursts of shells were very frequent in areas where large masses of artillery was concentrated, and were a source of great danger to infantrymen lying in reserve trenches, and to the transport bringing up rations and ammunitions. Late on the same night the remainder of my Company was to be relieved, and the gunners of the relieving Machine Gun Company collected in our trench until it was time for them to start for the support trenches where the remainder of our guns were in position. Just before they set off the masses of artillery behind us opened out the most terrific bombardment, every other sound but the nerve-racking barking and thundering of thousands of guns being utterly drowned, and it was quite impossible to enter into conversation with comrades standing against you. This bombardment had only been on for a couple of minutes when I noticed a commotion a little way down the trench among the men of the relieving Company, and on walking to the scene I found that two of their men were suffering from severe shell-shock; they were screaming and crying in turns, and it took half-a-dozen men to get them out of the trench to the dressing station, which was some 500 yards away.

During the half-hour that our artillery were busy straffing, the German artillery remained very quiet. We had a wearisome wait of nearly three hours before the whole of the Company was relieved and had collected at Headquarters. When everybody was ready we commenced our tramp out of the line, and just like the ways of the British Army, we took a route which appeared to me to take us considerably out of our course. For three hours we tramped along shell-battered roads and cross country tracks, passing through the ruins of the villages of Hardecourt and Maricourt. All the soldiers we saw lying in reserve while passing through this district belonged to the French Army, as also did most of the heavy batteries of artillery. We at last came to a field into which our transport had pulled, and we were all very soon rumaging for our packs which had been stored in some of the limbers.

## CHAPTER IX.

MY LAST FEW DAYS ON THE SOMME BATTLEFIELD,  
SEPTEMBER, 1916.

**I**N the scruffle that took place for the possession of a pack containing a great coat, in the darkness of the early hours of the morning after marching from the trenches, several men, including myself, did not get their own. Using the coat which I took out of the pack I had taken possession of as a blanket, I had several hours sleep on the grass, to awake with chattering teeth and very cold feet. A search for my pack revealed it in the possession of a member of No. 4 Section—George Robinson by name, and one of the guides who had nearly lead our party into the German trenches on the night of September 11th. On inspecting the contents of my valise I found it to be deficient of a shirt and cardigan jacket, and anything but friendly words were exchanged between myself and Private Robinson, although he endeavoured to assure me that he had only taken the great coat out. At the time I was almost certain that he was the culprit who had taken my things. Later, however, my acquaintance with the Transport Section of the Company lead me to think otherwise. This was my introduction to the first of the three men who eventually became my constant friends and companions during many a weary month spent in shell-battered and mud and water-logged trenches, and in rat infested billets when out of the fire zone for a few days' rest. At mid-day we had to pack up and march to some billets in the small town of Mericourt, and on the following morning, when we turned out on parade for the inspection of fire arms and equipment, I was finally posted to No. 4 Section. I joined one of the gun teams that I had accompanied out of the front line trench in Leuze Wood a few days ago. With this gun team I made the acquaintance of the second of my three constant comrades of the future. Tom Teasdale had lived in Canada for about 10 years prior to the outbreak of this Great World War, and being rejected from the Canadian Army had returned to England in 1915 and joined the Border Regiment, from which unit he was transferred to the Machine Gun Corps and came out to France in March, 1916.

On coming out of the line this last time the men had been given to understand that they were coming out for a good long rest. This good long rest, however, came to an end after only four days had been spent in Mericourt, and in the afternoon of September 18th, the 13th M.G. Company was again ready for marching to the trenches. It was an awfully wet day, and the rain was pouring down when we commenced our tramp shortly after mid-day. The cross country tracks by which we had to travel were very muddy, making marching very difficult and tiring. After struggling along these greasy tracks for about three hours with the rain washing down the whole time we halted to get a snack of bread and jam. As we were going to stop here until it was dusk a party of us went to a dump of empty ammunition boxes a few hundred yards away, each of us returning with three or four big wooden boxes. We were all very soon standing round a huge bonfire enjoying the intense heat which the blazing boxes threw out and at the same time drying our rain-soaked garments. When it began to get dusk we got orders to fall in again and resume our march to the trenches. The rain was still falling fast. We followed the hard road this time, which was much better for marching along than were the cross-country tracks, until we came to where it was very much knocked about by shell fire, and then for the remainder of our journey we were splashing through deep shell holes full of water. It was quite dark now and the Company had become one long line of struggling men and transport endeavouring to evade the countless number of shell craters. Among those who got submerged whilst picking their way down this road (if it could be so called, seeing that it was completely under water) was our Sergeant-Major. The water cart also got stuck in a shell-hole and could not be moved for a considerable time. Presently we came alongside a trench on the left edge of Trones Wood, in the reserve line, in which we had to remain for the time being. It was in a shocking condition, being knee deep with mud and water. Searching for somewhere to sleep I came across what looked to be a fairly safe "funk hole," so laying my ground sheet on the moist earth I crawled into my nest in the side of the trench out of the pouring rain and was very soon sleeping as sound as a bell. On waking up at daybreak I was chilled to the bone, and it was not until after I had had my meagre breakfast of bread

and bacon, washed down with a drink of hot tea, that I began to get any warmth into my body. On returning to that part of the trench where I had taken up my residence I found that my little home had fallen in; but I was very glad that it had not collapsed while I was sleeping in it. It took me some time to get my equipment clear of the heap of fallen earth. These "funk holes" were simply recesses dug into the parapet side of the trench usually about one foot from the bottom. When sat inside the soldier was sheltered from the rain and flying pieces of shell, with the exception of his feet, which in most cases dangled in the trench. The cutting of these shelters weakened the trenches very much, and the "gold braided gentlemen" who visited the scene of Tommy's hardships and activities only occasionally condemned this practice. But the infantryman took no notice of the "red and blue armletted Staff Officers," in view of the fact that it was himself who had to live in the fire trenches and face the sickening bombardments, which he did almost every day that he was in the line.

In the afternoon of the 19th several of our guns had to be taken to some positions in reserve, and as my team's gun was not one of them we cliqued for the job of carrying ammunition. All the ammunition, with the exception of several boxes which were taken by each of the teams that were going to the positions, was carried to a derelict tank a short way behind them. This was one of the fleet of tanks which had gone into action for the first time five days ago, and had evidently come to grief through trouble with its motors, as it had not been struck by shell fire and the ground was quite firm. After getting rid of our boxes of ammunition we went back about 100 yards and sat down in an old and much battered trench. The exploring of our resting place revealed some very gruesome sights, and I was very glad when orders came for us to go back to our trench further in the rear. The following afternoon all the ammunition had to be brought back from the derelict tank, and in the evening the gun teams that had taken their guns into the reserve trenches came out. When the guns had been packed into the limbers we commenced another weary night march. For two or three hours we trudged along making our way through numerous parks of heavy artillery in action, almost being lifted off our feet whenever we chanced to pass only a few yards in front of a

15in., 9.2in. or 60-pounder gun, as it discharged one of its heavy missiles. Our big guns were still pounding the Boche's positions both night and day.

We marched northward parallel with the line until we came to another trench in the reserves, and which was to be our billet for the next two days. No rain had fallen for the last 24 hours, and the atmosphere was much clearer, enabling the artillery to range on new targets. Jerry also took advantage of the fine weather, and on the second day of our stay in this trench he commenced ranging on a battery of heavy guns which was in position behind us. To be able to observe clearly the result of their shooting the German gunners used a shell which on exploding threw up a pillar of dark brown smoke 50 or more feet high. These shells were bursting less than 100 yards to the back of us, and we were rather glad of the fact that we should be moving again within a few hours, before the enemy would commence a systematic bombardment of this area with their heavy howitzer batteries.

In the afternoon of September 22nd we were once again on the move, this time we were making for the front line trench behind the village of Morval, the latter being in the German lines. About 2,000 yards behind the front line we unloaded our guns and gun equipment from the limbers. The transport drivers immediately turned their mules round and trotted back in the direction of the transport lines which were some three miles further in the rear. Shouldering our heavy loads we moved up as far as the most advanced field gun, about 1,000 yards behind the fire trenches. This was as far as we could venture in daylight, so we sat down in shell holes until it began to get dusk. As we resumed our journey the Germans commenced a desultory shell fire, extending from the front line to a depth of 500 yards. We were following what had once been a railroad, but all that was left of it now was a long narrow stretch of land littered with twisted and battered pieces of metal rails, some of which had been blown many yards away, and wood sleepers all split and smashed into matchwood. About 250 yards behind the front line we came to the entrance of a sunken road, and the Germans were straffing it very heavily with that vicious little shell the "whizz-bang." Two of the Sections of my Company which were to do barrage fire had already arrived in their positions, but my Section, No. 4,

and two gun teams of No. 2 Section had to take up positions in the front line. Before entering the sunken road we formed single file, with No. 2 Section leading. We had barely entered this infernal road when a shell burst in the centre of the 2 leading teams—result, one man killed and seven wounded. This fatality occurred quite close to the "Battalion Aid Post" of the 1st Royal West Kent Regiment of the 13th Infantry Brigade, and thus the wounded were able to have their wounds dressed immediately. The teams had now to be re-arranged, and four of my Section, including myself, were transferred to the gun teams that had suffered the casualties. No. 4 Section then continued on its way to the front line, while myself and four others were left behind to wait for reinforcements before taking the two guns of No. 2 Section forward. We could not find the Officer who was supposed to be in charge of these two guns, and as shells were then falling thicker than when we first entered the sunken roadway, we also acted up to that old legend, "Discretion is the better part of valour," and betook ourselves to the shelter of a near-by dug-out. No one was occupying it at the time, but we learned that a number of men belonging to the Headquarters Staff of the Royal West Kents would be arriving early in the morning. We secured several hours sleep before we were disturbed by the entry of the rightful tenants. When daylight came we had to leave the security of this German built bomb-proof and take to a trench on the opposite side of the road. On crossing the road we passed the body of our late comrade, Lance-Corporal Smith, laid on a stretcher and covered with an old water-proof sheet.

Throughout the day this trench was heavily shelled by the Boche, and we had many narrow escapes from shells which burst in the trench. Another trench which crossed the road and our trench (which by the way was a communication trench) at right angles also received its share of iron rations. The men of the Royal Warwicks, who were lying in support to the men in the front line were occupying this trench, and during the day they had a number of men killed by the shells which dropped into it. In the afternoon two men came down from the front line for the purpose of guiding us to our posts. But while we were waiting for darkness to fall a shell which burst in the trench only a couple of yards from us wounded them both and half choked my mates and

myself with sulphur fumes with which the bursting shell filled our trench. Before night we had a visit from No. 2 Section Officer, that gentleman having plucked up sufficient courage to leave the shelter of the Headquarters of the Royal West Kents which was in a shell-proof dug-out deep down under the bank of the sunken road. He informed us that the two guns we had would not be required, but that he wanted two men to accompany him to the front line. I was one of the two men. At dusk we set off in the wake of one of the Company's runners for the advanced Section's Headquarters. A walk of ten minutes brought us to our destination, a stone quarry about 25 yards behind the front line or fire trench. This quarry was also used as Headquarters by several Infantry Company Commanders. On one side of this haven a number of dug-outs had been cut, by the Germans of course, but they were all fully occupied, chiefly by Officers and their servants. Our Officer had disappeared into one of these retreats as soon as we arrived, so, after a friendly conversation with several runners, officers' servants and platoon sergeants who had congregated in the quarry for orders, or as would be more likely, for a pull of their Officer's whisky bottle (or that familiar jar marked R.S.D.), we commenced looking round for somewhere to sleep. We had to be content with lying on the smoothest patch of stone and gravel we could find close to the wall, where we thought we should be safe from bursting shells and where we could also watch the stars twinkling in the clear sky before closing our eyes in peaceful slumber. On waking after spending the night out in the open towards the end of September with only a soldier's ground sheet for covering, one does not feel any too warm; neither did I when I rose from my couch about six in the morning. Our artillery was severely pounding the German line in preparation for the assault which was to take place next day, September 25th, at 12.30 p.m. An artillery officer was directing the fire of our heavy batteries from this stone quarry. The German artillery, on the other hand, was exceptionally quiet, as far as the front line was concerned, only a few shells dropping in our vicinity. In the evening I accompanied the ration party down to the sunken road for No. 4 Section's rations, and on the return journey the Boche commenced a lively bombardment between the road and the front line. We took to a trench after leaving the road, but this was occupied by a lot of infantry-

men, and, hampered with the ration bags we had slung over our shoulders, our progress became very slow. Presently the trench became so congested with wounded and the troops already occupying it that we decided to venture out into the open. Getting on to the top we made our way through the barrage of whizz-bangs as fast as our legs and loads would allow us. Shells whizzed viciously over our heads, exploding only a few yards behind us, others were bursting in front of us and on both sides, and all of them sent showers of shrapnel flying in all directions, and from the moans and cries which followed us from the trench we had just vacated we knew that the shells were reaping their harvest in killed and wounded. Without sustaining any casualties we eventually arrived back at the quarry. The ration bags were at once opened by the Section Sergeant—McMoran by name—and, after taking out the rations for myself and mate, divided them into four lots, one for each of the four gun teams.

Evening is always a busy time in the firing line, and round about the shelters of the officers a number of runners had collected, patiently waiting for the messages they had to take to the various Platoon Commanders scattered about the front line. Ration parties arriving and departing with their precious loads; officer's servants flitting in and out of the several dug-outs; runners, sergeants and buckshee men like myself standing in groups in this excavation a few yards behind the British front line, presented an animated picture in the white glare of the Verrey Lights. For a resting place this night I managed to find a vacant corner in the shelter of one of the dug-outs.

The dawn of the 25th day of September, 1916, was heralded with the clash and thunder of thousands of guns, both French and British, as they commenced a stupendous bombardment of the enemy's lines prior to the infantry attack which was timed for 12.30 p.m. With a smile of satisfaction beaming on his face the Heavy Artillery Observation Officer watched the result of stream after stream of 9.2in. shells bursting on a German machine gun stronghold some 400 yards in front of us. Very few gunners would survive that awful shell fire, and their brother warriors in the infantry would listen in vain for the rattle of their favourite weapon of defence. During the morning bombardment the Boche artillery became more active, and several

shells burst with a loud detonation on the walls of the quarry, sending showers of rock down into the bottom, and making us skuttle into the nearest shelter. Punctually at 12.30 the 1st Battalion Royal West Kents and the 1st Battalion King's Own Scottish Borderers (both of the 13th Infantry Brigade) climbed out of the trench and commenced quite leisurely to advance towards the German trenches. In spite of the thunder of our artillery, the humming of thousands of bullets fired from eight of the 13th Company's machine guns could be heard as they whizzed over our heads on their way to make an impassable barrier between the enemy's reserves and his hard pressed front line troops. Less than quarter of an hour after the commencement of the attack the first batch of prisoners, together with an escort of several Tommies with fixed bayonets, are seen running towards us through a hail of shrapnel. On one side of the quarry the Germans are placing a heavy barrage of 5.9's, but the leading prisoners are taking no risks of being bowled over by their own artillery, and as they get close to the quarry they commence making a wide detour round to the left where fewer shells are falling.

A number of slightly wounded Tommies are now also making their way to the rear. Presently a string of stretcher cases come into view, and among the bearers are a number of young Teutons assisting our infantrymen in their honourable work of stretcher bearing. The French troops away on our right had also gone over the top about the same time, and from the high ground on top of the quarry their infantry could be seen making their way across "No Man's Land" to the German entrenchments. From some of the slightly wounded men who came into this shelter for a rest we learned that the attack had been a big success, and that our troops had sustained very few casualties. About two o'clock in the afternoon heavy German shells began to burst on the walls of our stronghold forcing us to take shelter in our dug-outs. Half-a-dozen men were in the bombproof with myself, and for an hour we all sat tight in our corners watching an ever-increasing heap of stones which were being blown down at the entrance. When the bombardment subsided only a very small opening was left for us to crawl through. Our four machine guns in the front line (before the attack) had not been moved forward with the infantry, and were now trained on the Boche's new position. In the event of them

launching a counter-attack they would be met with a hail of bullets which would send them reeling back behind their parapet.

During the afternoon one man of No. 4 Section had been wounded, and that night I had to join the team to which he had belonged. On arriving at the gun position about 8 p.m. a spell of sentry duty was allotted me—midnight to 2 a.m.—and as that gave me four hours in which to get a nap, I squeezed myself into a hollow dug underneath the parapet and level with the bottom of the trench. I was quite safe from all bullets and pieces of shrapnel, but should a 5.9 happen to push the walls of the trench over on top of me the result would be disastrous. Nothing of this nature occurred, however, and at 12, midnight, I was nudged in the ribs by the man on sentry and informed that it was my turn for sentry. It was a frosty night, and from lying in the trench bottom I was quite stiff with cold. Lance-Corporal Humble, one of the 1914 stagers, gave me a sure remedy for this. Handing me his waterbottle which was three-parts full of that precious liquid, rum—"the soldier's reviver"—I took a good drink and immediately felt it running right through my system, giving me a warm and cheerful feeling. For two hours I looked into the black night, lit up only by the occasional brilliant glare of a German Verrey Light, listening to the whine of streams of German shells speeding on their way to some battery in the rear, or to the explosion of salvoes of their whizz-bangs as they burst on one of our trenches not far away. From our new positions a few hundred yards in front came the crack of rifles, the rattling of machine guns, and now and again the dull explosion of a hand grenade. Overhead whirled the never-ceasing stream of British shells. Such a night as this would be commented upon by the Blighty newspapers as "all was quiet last night on the Somme battlefield after a successful daylight advance."

At two o'clock I roused my relief and then laid down until stand-to. We had an early breakfast consisting of bacon, bread and hot tea, the latter being strongly flavoured with rum. Each gun team possessed (or had possessed) Primus stoves on which we cooked our simple meals. The stove on this team was in good condition. On one occasion this stove had been left in a position from which the team had to vacate on account of heavy shell fire, and it was well known how one of the gunners had gone back into the danger

zone to retrieve it. The personnel of the gun team consisted of one Lance-Jack and three men, namely, Lance-Corporal Dick Humble, Private Dave Crawford, Private Harold Holmes and myself. The individual called Private Holmes delighted in airing his extensive knowledge of the mechanism and actual working of the Vicker's machine gun, and was in his glory when arguing on this subject with either officers or men. He completed the trio of my future comrades-to-be. As soon as breakfast was over we set on cleaning the gun, which work commenced a heated argument about the weapon, lasting nearly all the morning. Private Holmes had a great deal to say of course. Early in the afternoon I saw for the first time one of our land battleships sailing majestically over our trench less than 100 yards away on the right, and amid a shower of bursting shells it continued on its way to our new front line. A nest of German machine gunners would no doubt soon make the acquaintance of this "cruiser of the battlefield." About 3.30 p.m. a message was brought to us containing the welcome news that we had to dismount our gun and make our way out of the line. We were very soon re-tracing our steps down the sunken road, where only a few nights ago the misfortune of war had befallen one of our number of men. On reaching the self-same spot we sat down for a few minutes' rest. The God of Fate was evidently guiding our steps, for we had only been resting a few seconds when, with a wild screech a German shell sailed over our heads to burst only 25 yards in front of us. Had we kept on instead of resting where we had, that shell would also have reaped its harvest. Our transport met us not far from here, and when the four gun teams of No. 4 Section had turned up and the guns and equipment had been securely packed the men (with the exception of myself) formed fours ready to march to the transport line about four miles back. The Section Officer (2nd-Lieut. H. Russell-Bladon) had instructed me to accompany his servant with the limbers. Soon after the limbers moved off we were both perched on the top of one. We were very much shaken about and several times almost jerked right off our lofty perch as the limber lurched from one side to another passing over deep shell holes.

We arrived at the transport lines a good half-hour in front of the Section. My Company was to take over some huts for the night, which were just being vacated by men

of the Guards' Division. The Guardsmen were leaving to take a turn in the trenches. When the huts had been finally taken over, the Sections (with the exception of No. 4) were detailed off to their huts. Huts to accommodate only the officers and three sections were available, thus my Section had to fare on the same lines as the transport mules out in the open. To make matters worse it literally washed down with rain just as it got dark, but did not last long however. My Section was given the loan of a tarpaulin sheet by way of a shelter for the night. Putting on our great coats we lay down on our ground sheets which had been spread out on the damp ground to form a large square, and then we pulled the tarpaulin over us so that it left peeping from underneath each side half-a-dozen heads, some encased in woollen comforters and others in service caps. Some bed. Just as I was enjoying my first sleep a knocker-up in the form of a German aeroplane came on the scene. This large camping ground, which was just out of range of shell fire, was dotted about with numerous camp fires, but on the explosion of the first bomb they were all extinguished with surprising quickness. The bombs, numbering about 12 all fell about 200 yards from where my Company was billeted, lighting up the whole area with their vivid flashes of fire as they burst one after the other on the camp of some unfortunate Unit. Before the ruthless disturber of the peace had barely passed out of hearing most of my bed mates were again fast asleep, and not many minutes must have elapsed before I also had followed suit. The next morning, September 27th, we had to get ready for leaving the Somme district, and not a single one of us was at all sorry to say good-bye to the scene of the terrible struggle of the last three months. In the afternoon before we marched away we all received a pay of 10 francs each: the C.O. wanted to pack us off to our winter quarters in a contented frame of mind.

## CHAPTER X.

### ABOUT NO. 4 SECTION AND THE 13TH M.G. COMPANY GENERALLY.

**O**N the first day of October the Company arrived at the railhead at Lillers, our migration from the Somme area having been accomplished by two separate train journeys. We travelled for about nine hours in the first

train and stayed in a small village for 24 hours before entraining for the second time. It was in this village that several of the sergeants got the worse for drink, and when we paraded to march away to the station, they were hardly able to stand, let alone march ten kilometres. One of them afterwards remarked that only his pack strapped on his back kept him from falling on his face.

From Lillers we marched through the town of Bethune to Essars, a small village one mile to the north. We remained in this village for three days before Nos. 1, 2 and 3 Sections had to proceed into the trenches at Festubert and Givenchy. As only three of the Sections had to be in the trenches together, and the 4th in reserve, my Section proceeded to what were called the rest billets in the village of Gorre. This village was only two miles behind the firing line. The Company had the use of a farm for a billet, and like all French farms the house was built on one side and the cowsheds, stables, pigsties and barns joined to it to form a square open space. In the centre of this courtyard is a shallow well which takes up the greater part of it, leaving just sufficient room to walk round by the buildings. All the manure from the stables, &c., is thrown into this well, and as it only gets cleaned out about twice a year it often overflows its banks. All the pigs and poultry on the farm are let out on to this manure heap each day. As three Sections of the Company would now always be in the trenches, we only had this one farm for billets. The house is used by the few officers who are not in the line, and also accommodates their servants. The barn on the right is the Quartermaster's stores and the signallers' den. On the left is another cottage, rather an unusual thing in French farmyards, occupied by the women and an old man, who are carrying on the work in the absence of the men who are serving with the French Army. On the same side next the pigsties is a whitewashed room used by the sergeants and their cronies of the Section which happens to be out for a brief rest. In the block of shaky buildings opposite the house occupied by the officers is the guard room adjoining the stables and cowsheds. We now come to the main billet, that occupied by the gunners. This is the barn which goes over the cowshed and stables and is reached by climbing up some rickety steps either in the guard room or another lot off the end of the cowshed. This barn is also shared with the men of the 13th

Brigade Trench Mortar Battery. One-half just holds our handful of men without crowding—about 25 in all. My Section is having the pleasure of the first six days in these, the Company's rest billets. Our transport lines are in the orchard at the back of the farm buildings, and the drivers have to make their own dwelling places. The six days we spent in these billets before proceeding to the trenches were spent in overhauling the guns and ammunition and repainting the tripods. Our Section Officer did not overwork us, he was what is termed a cushy officer. He would not have done the Section any harm if he had been a little more strict. He could not be called a dashing or fearless officer when in the line, but preferred an obscure post free from any great danger. We had no fear of him leading us through the valley of the shadow of death on his own initiative. In all other respects he was a good officer and knew how to handle a machine gun. He was very tall, standing not less than six feet. Our two sergeants were both good men; the Section Sergeant (McMoran) having originally belonged to a London Battalion of Territorials which came out to France late in 1914. The Second Sergeant (Sergeant Smith) came from a line battalion of the King's Own Yorkshire-Light Infantry, and had also been in France since 1914. He was a Yorkshireman, being a native of Harrogate. Several of my Section came from the county of Yorkshire. Private George Haigh, a tiller of the land in civil life, came from Howden. He had only joined us as we were leaving the Somme district along with two other men, but we had already become great friends. On having a talk together we learned that we both enlisted into the same regiment, the East Yorkshires, and that we were both in the same Company and under the same instructors; thus, coupled with the fact that we were both Yorkshiremen, our friendship was sealed on making our first acquaintance. Private Holmes hailed from a town noted for its beer—Tadcaster.

Another warrior of 1914 fame, Private Hinks by name, but always referred to as "Ciss," also belonged to the county of broad acres. "Ciss" was one of the few men who knew no danger. Subjected to the fiercest of shell fire he would remain as cool and calm as if no danger existed whatsoever. When he happened to be precipitated into the bottom of the trench by a Boche shell barely escaping with his life he would rise smiling and crack a joke about the poor

shooting of the German artillery. Having a Scotch Battalion in the Brigade, Scotland is also well represented in the Section. Dave Crawford and Jimmy Dyer, two inseparables, both belong to Glasgow district, also Private Wallace. Jock McCarthy, another Scotchman, had been sent to Brigade Headquarters as Orderly as soon as we arrived at our present billets. No. 1 Section, however, was the "Scottish Section," having been formed early in 1916 from the machine gunners of the 1st Battalion King's Own Scottish Borderers, whilst my Section No. 4 had been formed from the M.G. Section of 1st Battalion King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. No. 4 had the distinction of being the first of the Sections of the 13th Company to be formed, date of formation being the 25th December, 1915, Corporal Humble, Privates Speed and Hinks being three of the original gunners. Speed and Hinks had both given promotion a wide berth. In the Section we also had five attached men belonging to the 14th Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment.

As the four Sections kept very much to themselves men in one Section knew very little about the men in the other Sections. No. 1 Section had two very good officers in 2nd-Lieut. Watts and 2nd-Lieut. Gibbs. Both these Officers were Scotchmen, as also was their Section Sergeant, Campbell by name, and about half of the men. No. 2 Section had only a poor officer in 2nd-Lieut. Sealey, and was considered the most unlucky Section in the Company as regards casualties in the line. The Officer in charge of No. 3 Section was a rather blustering sort of individual, especially when in the trenches. This Section had in Pedlar Palmer, their Section Sergeant, a fine soldier, and one of the old "Contemptibles." No. 3 Section was originally formed from the Machine Gun Section of the 1st Battalion Royal West Kent Regiment, a few of whom were still carrying on. Our Company-Sergeant-Major, an ex-member of the K.O.Y.L.I., was also one of the "1914 Contemptibles," and was well liked by everyone in the Company. The Quartermaster-Sergeant came from the Duke of Wellington's Regiment, and not a man or even an Officer of the Company could come up to him in regard to the working of the Vickers' machine gun. Our Commanding Officer, Major Cutting, had risen from the ranks, being only a Lance-Corporal when he came to France in 1914. Sergeant Palmer often related to

us how, early in 1915, when he was at a Machine Gun School of Instruction, Lance-Corporal Cutting was his instructor, and reported him for lack of attention, which resulted in Palmer being sent back to his Battalion. Major Cutting being a fine soldier was esteemed by all ranks. The Second-in-Command, Lieut. Burdett, was another very good officer, and came from the 1st Battalion Royal West Kents. He was well liked by the Company in general. Last, but a most necessary section in a company of machine gunners, comes the Transport Section, consisting of about 36 N.C.O.'s and men under one Officer, Lieut. Stuart. The Transport-Sergeant was a bully with his men, and was disliked by almost everyone in the Company. The most popular man on the transport was a Yorkshireman—Driver Munsey. He had been a gunner in No. 4 Section until he was transferred to his present occupation a few months ago. Among the drivers was one, Tim Kelly, a native of the same old city as myself.

Since arriving at these billets we had once again come into possession of a couple of blankets. When the time came for us to go into the trenches our blankets would be left behind for the use of the Section who would take our places here. Thus for every four gunners in the Company only two blankets were needed, until such time as the whole of the Company would be out of the line for a brief rest, when a further supply would have to be drawn.

The morning of October 10th was occupied in preparing our guns for the trenches, inspections of gas masks, equipments, &c., and in packing our few belongings which would not be required in the trenches. As the nights were beginning to get cold great coats were to be taken. By three o'clock in the afternoon we were all ready for our first trip into the trenches at Festubert and Givenchy—it was to be a spell of 18 days.

## CHAPTER XI.

### FESTUBERT AND GIVENCHY.

**L**ESS than half-an-hour's march from the billets in Gorre brought us into the ruined village of Festubert, about 1,000 yards behind the front line, and here we unloaded our guns from the limbers to be carried by hand to the gun positions. We then entered a very shallow and

winding communication trench called "Barton trench," down which we made our way for ten minutes before we emerged out of it to continue our journey behind a breastwork of sandbags about six feet high. This was the first time that the majority of us had been in a section of the firing line where breastwork defences took the place of trenches dug deep into the ground. Trenches could not be dug on this part of the line owing to the boggy nature of the ground, water being reached after digging about three feet down. A walk of five minutes behind this wall brought the gun team I was with to the position we had to take over. This zig-zag stretch of breastwork in which the four guns of my section were now stationed stretched from Givenchy Hill to beyond Neuve Chapelle, and this particular part of it was called the "O.B.L.," being the initial letters of "Old British Line." In 1914 this was the front line but became a support line after the fighting which took place between Givenchy and Neuve Chapelle in the month of May, 1915. The present front line positions were some 600 yards in front. Our gun was mounted on a platform cut out on top of the breastwork only a few yards from the entrance of the sand-bagged bivouac in which we had to live. The shelter was six feet square and four feet high, and the roof consisted of sheets of corrugated iron with two layers of sandbags laid on the top; a very poor shelter in the event of a heavy bombardment. This section of the line was very quiet indeed, not a gun of any description had I heard since we first entered the Barton Trench in the village of Festubert, and it was not until dusk that any signs of hostilities commenced. The German machine gunners were, very soon after it began to get dark, busy sweeping our breastworks, the roads and tracks in the rear, with their fire. We had not yet got our gun set for overhead fire so that the streams of bullets from the Boche machine guns were not replied to this night. Away to the right however, some of the Company's guns could be heard retaliating to the enemy's fire. During my turn of sentry-go at midnight trench mortar batteries in the vicinity of Givenchy became very active, and continued so for over an hour. A couple of whiz-bangs came over and burst about 100 yards to the left, and these were the only shells I heard that night. What a contrast this was to the never ceasing nerve-racking bombardments that had been our daily and

nightly lot for the last few weeks during the Somme Offensive.

Returning to a quiet part of the line and to trench warfare, one also returned to the pest of the trenches—"The Rat." This section of breastworks between the ruins of Givenchy and Festubert absolutely swarmed with them. While I was on sentry I saw dozens of them flitting in and out of our shelter, and the top of the breastwork and shelters were literally alive with these detestable creatures. If you took a walk down the trench at night time you could not help but tread on or kick some of them as they careered from the doorway (minus a door) of one bivvy into another. When it was time for my relief to come out I struck a match on entering our den, instantly there was a scuffle and squealing of rats, and I just caught sight of the forms of some dozen or so as they chased over my sleeping comrades and disappeared into numerous holes in the walls of the shelter. As soon as my man was ready to take over from me I crawled inside and laid down in the space vacated by him in the hopes of having a good four hours nap. It is not very pleasant to have rats running over your face, and we all took the precaution of securely covering our heads with our great coats. With darkness reigning once more in our bed chamber our uninvited guests again ventured forth, the first intimation of their reappearance being a curse from one of my mates accompanied by a vigorous kick. Presently I felt several run over my legs, but one of them sat down on my foot, and which I immediately sent on an aerial voyage to the far side of the bivvy. This continued for some time until I went over into a sound sleep, leaving our four-legged visitors to frolic about as much as they pleased. At daybreak all the activities of the night ceased—the rats had disappeared as if by magic, and everything was quiet and peaceful. In the course of the day I had a look round the O.B.L. It twisted in and out every few yards, and was more of a semi-circle than a straight line. Numerous crosses marking the last resting place of British soldiers were dotted about at the back of the breastworks, dating from 1914 to 1916. Shelters for the men holding the line were constructed the whole length of it. Midway behind this line some water tanks had been erected, and the drinking water for all the men holding the Festubert sector was drawn from here. During the morning groups of infantrymen could be seen

filling sand bags with earth for strengthening the defences, which were very weak in places and in need of much repairing. We also had our share of work to do in this respect.

In the afternoon preparations were made for night firing, the taking of compass bearings, the working out of the necessary elevation and direction at which the gun had to be set, and the making of a screen of bags on poles to be fixed round the gun to prevent the flash from being seen by the Germans. At dusk we took the gun and mounted it in a position halfway down the Barton Communication Trench between the O.B.L. and the front line. Bursts of about 20 rounds had to be fired every 15 minutes throughout the night, but the gun had to be brought back to its old position at stand-to each morning. The fire from our gun was directed on to some cross roads about a mile behind the Boche front line, and which were supposed to be very much used by the German ration parties. In this manner each gun fired about 1,000 rounds every night, and the belts which had been emptied had to be refilled next morning. The boxes of S.A.A., weighing 84 pounds, had to be brought from the hamlet of La Plantain half-a-mile in the rear of the O.B.L., on the road running parallel with the line from Festubert to Givenchy Road. This village was connected to the trenches by a shallow trench called Cheshire Trench, and by a byroad called Yellow Road. The latter could not be used in the day-time by parties of men as it was under observation from the enemy's lines.

On the third day after arriving in the trenches I had to leave my gun team and take over the job of runner for No. 1 Section, who were holding the trenches at Givenchy. I had to stay with the signallers who lived in a small canvas hut erected within the walls of a ruined house situated about 20 yards from the crossroads in La Plantain. This signal station was connected to Company Headquarters in Gorre, and all messages that could not be sent over the wires were conveyed by runner. All messages for the officers in the line were left with the signallers in this hut for us section runners to deliver. It was at this spot that all the Company's rations, ammunition and trench stores were dumped, to be conveyed into the trenches by the men who came for rations each night. While it was still daylight I accompanied a member of No. 1 Section to his Officers' Headquarters. To get to this Section we had to make our way across several

fields at the back of La Plantain, which brought us to a large farm building on the road at the point where the road leading into what had once been the village of Givenchy joined it. On reaching the roadway we entered a communication trench on the left of the Givenchy road. Givenchy was on a higher level than Festubert, and good trenches could be dug; this trench down which we were making our way being about seven feet deep. After following this trench for about 10 minutes my guide climbed out and took me across the open towards some fortified ruins. An infantryman was on sentry at the only entrance to this stronghold, which was a short tunnel about three yards long, and on passing through we came into the courtyard of the farm that had once stood here. Walls composed of bricks and numerous layers of sand-bags railed off an area of about 20 square yards, and around the two sides of the wall facing the line loop holes to fire through and fire steps for the men to stand on had been constructed.

No. 1 Section had their headquarters in one of the underground cellars, of which there were several in this modern fort, which was called Moat Farm. After seeing the Officer-in-charge of the Section I began my return journey to La Plantain. Late on the night of the same day I had a message to deliver at Moat Farm and I did not find it so very easy in tracing my way as it appeared to be in daylight. On the return journey, however, I took the advice of the Officer, and instead of going back by the narrow winding communication trench I returned by the roadway. The road passed Moat Farm about 30 yards on the right, and to reach it I had to make my way across a narrow and shaky little foot bridge, which spanned a wide and deep hole full of stagnant water. This was an awkward spot to negotiate by a stranger in the dark and with bullets whizzing past your head every few seconds. Five minutes walk down the road brought me to a barricade which was built across it at a point a few yards before it joined the main road. "Windy Corner," as this junction of roads was called, was swept by the fire from the German machine guns and by fixed snipers' rifles every night. Passing through the farm buildings into the fields at the back I was very soon back in the hut. These farm buildings were used by the infantry as a reserve billet. When a unit is holding a quiet part of the line the duties of a runner are not heavy

or very numerous, and on an average I only had two messages each day, one during the morning and the second about eight o'clock at night. Occasionally we had to make quite a number of trips during the day and night.

One night when I returned from delivering my usual evening message another was waiting for me, and as it was a very dark wet night I was not over-pleased at having this extra trip. It was very difficult crossing the fields on a dark night, as the several wide ditches which ran through them were only bridged by narrow boards, and on this occasion I had to wait until the Germans kindly fired one of their extra brilliant Verey Lights before I could see whether I was approaching one of these bridges, and also to cross over while it was still visible in glare. German machine gun fire was also very troublesome across these fields, sweeping them at the dangerous height of only 3 to 4 feet from the ground. This was a rum issue night, and on delivering my second message I received a good tot before starting on my return journey. I had only been back from my last trip about 15 minutes when a third message was brought in for the O./C. No. 1 Section. For the third time this wet night I had to make my way across the dark greasy fields and up the Givenchy road to Moat Farm, to be consoled by another good tot of rum on arrival there. It was midnight by the time I got back to the village of La Plantain and "down to it"—the soldiers term for going to bed.

My bed consisted of a thick layer of sand-bags, and my bed clothes of a great coat, one big sack and numerous small sand-bags. First of all I took off my boots, puttees and socks, pulled a couple of sand-bags on to each leg, got into the sack which came up to my neck, threw the great coat over my shoulders and rested my head on a pillow of bags—thus I would sleep warm and comfortable until 7.30 in the morning.

Festubert and La Plantain were called the "village lines," and each Section had to spend six days here during its 18 days' spell in the line. The Headquarters of the Section in the village lines was in a cellar under the ruins of a house on the opposite side of the road a few yards below the signal station. Within the walls of a ruined house, almost opposite was the gum boot store, where in wet weather we all received a pair of boots reaching the thighs before going into the trenches. The Festubert Sector was always

more or less under water in wet weather, and most of the trenches in the Givenchy Sector became miniature rivers.

Since leaving the Somme district leave to England had been started, and in the absence of our Commanding Officer, who was one of the first to go, the Adjutant took over the command, and my Section Officer had taken over the work of the Adjutant. The Section was now in the charge of Sergeant McMoran. Just the night before the Section was due to leave the O.B.L. for the village line, McMoran got into a serious scrape. Having taken more rum than what was good for him he had gone out into "No man's land" where he ran into a patrol belonging to the Warwickshire Regiment, and as he would not give them any satisfactory reason for prowling about between the lines he was arrested by the Officer-in-Charge of the Patrol and sent under escort to Gorre. Sergeant Smith was now left in charge of No. 4 Section. The following afternoon they came into the village line taking over two reserve gun positions near the ruins of Festubert Church, another close to the entrance of Cheshire Trench, and a fourth in the ruins of a house to the right of this trench. The Section in the village line was allowed to send four men into Gorre each day for the purpose of getting a bath and, if possible, a clean change of underclothing, but it was very rare that the latter were obtainable. When six days had been spent here No. 4 Section had to relieve the Section in the trenches at Givenchy. On taking over this sector I had to leave the signallers' hut and take up my abode at Moat Farm with Sergeant Smith and Private Brampton. The last-named acted as batman to the sergeants, there being no other work that he was capable of performing. It was my duty to accompany Sergeant Smith round to the four gun positions every night and morning. Almost every night we received from the O.C. the infantry in these trenches details of the patrols and working parties they would have out during the night, which information had to be given to all our gunners. These messages were sent to us at all hours of the night, and sometimes at very short notice. On receiving these messages we had to inform our gun teams, and any gun team that was engaged in night firing had to stop firing until the patrol or working party had come back to the trenches. To save time on these occasions Sergeant Smith would go round to the guns at Givenchy Keep and Maria Redoubt, and

myself to the front line—Scottish trench—and to a gun that was always engaged in overhead fire in a trench about 100 yards to the left front of Moat Farm. Every morning I had to be down at the signal station in La Plantain before seven o'clock with a report on the work done by each gun team, and before eleven o'clock in the morning I had a casualty report to deliver. As we were holding a quiet part of the line this last report was nearly always rendered as "nil." My work was then finished until about five o'clock in the afternoon, when I usually accompanied the ration party down to the dump for our supplies for the following day.

The 14th Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment had a canteen in the trenches where the men of that Battalion could buy tinned fruit for their afternoon tea and the indispensable "Woodbine" to soothe their nerves after patrol duty in No Man's Land. This canteen was barred to all who were not in the Battalion, but by substituting one's own shoulder titles for a set of the Warwicks you could always obtain whatever you required. The cellar in which we were living was swarmed with rats, but as we slept on boards raised from the ground they did not trouble us very much. When we had been six days in this sector we were relieved by the Section from La Plantain. This was the end of our first spell of trench work at Givenchy and Festubert, and when the four gun positions had been taken over we made our way back to the rest billets in Gorre.

## CHAPTER XII.

TRENCH WARFARE DURING NOVEMBER AND DECEMBER, 1916.

THE short period that we spent in the village of Gorre were days of absolute rest, a picket of three men and one N.C.O. each night being the only duty we had to perform. From two o'clock in the afternoon until 8.30 in the evening we were free to leave our billets and explore the village and others that were round about. We could not go into the town of Bethune, however, without first obtaining a pass signed by one of our officers. While we were out at rest Speed and Hinks were at last persuaded to take a step up and become Lance-Jacks. Classes for the instruction of a number of infantrymen from each of the four Battalions

in the 13th Brigade in the use of the Vickers' machine gun commenced about this time, and Speed and Hinks became two of the instructors at these classes.

These six days of rest soon passed over, however, and once again we prepared for another 18 days spell in the trenches. The weather during October had been very good, but now that we had got to the month of November it became much colder and the nights were very long and dark. On this occasion I again have to make my home with the signallers in the capacity of section runner. As we only arrived at La Plantain about four o'clock in the afternoon a party of men remained here for the purpose of taking up the rations which would be here shortly after five o'clock.

Since the 5th Division first took over this part of the line four weeks ago hostile fire had gradually become more intense, especially machine gun and trench mortar fire. The "Fifth" was a Division that was never idle in the firing line. Our Divisional Artillery were now sending over more shells in one day than had previously been fired in a week. At least four of my Company's guns were engaged on night firing and two of them continued to fire throughout the day-time as well. Jerry, our friend over the way, greatly resented the attention we paid him, and retaliated with vigour, especially with his maxims and trench mortar guns. A few of us were very soon to see how well he could manipulate his machine gun. By the time our rations had arrived and we were ready for making our way to the O.B.L. machine gun bullets had begun to whizz over all the roads and tracks. We decided to go down Yellow Road, and commenced our journey with the stream of bullets passing well over our heads. Suddenly the German gunner depressed his gun just sufficient to bring the hail of bullets full on to the road down which we were walking. Most of the bullets struck the road at our feet or passed between us, striking the trees and bushes on the side of the road. The only thing we could do was to wait for the gunner to divert his fire elsewhere, which he did after trying for two or three minutes to give us all a "Blighty one" in the foot—but without success. It surprised us very much that not one of us was hit. This Boche gun, which was set with such accuracy, would be firing at a range of not less than 1,500 yards. Throughout the long nights the German machine gunners kept the air seething with bullets to a depth of over

1,000 yards behind our front line. In the signallers' hut we could hear them striking the walls of the houses, and occasionally the clatter of one of the few tiles that still remained on the roof as it was struck by one of the bullets.

When we first came to the Festubert sector we had the English Continental Newspaper brought right up to our sentry posts by three or four children, who came round this sector every day shouting "English newspaper." But as the sector became more and more disturbed, and the days when no firing of any description took place became fewer and far between, our newsboys ceased to visit us with their papers.

Our rations at this time were quite good—plenty of bread, plum and apple and cheese, salty bacon and tough beef or mutton. The latter was cooked before sending it to the men in the line. Rations were considered bad when only half the usual supply of bread and fresh meat came up, the other half consisting of "bully and biscuits." It is interesting to know what usually became of the "B. and B." The tins of bully were dumped into the nearest ditch and the biscuits when put on a bright coke fire threw out a lovely heat which was much appreciated on a cold frosty night. The half-dozen signallers and runners and myself who stayed at the signal station in La Plantain augmented our daily supply of rations by purchasing bread and fresh eggs from the civilians in the village of Gorre. These supplies were brought to us by the runner who journeyed between here and our rest billets. By the time my Section had to take over the Givenchy sector rain had begun to fall almost daily, and the track through the fields was boot top deep in mud.

One afternoon we were surprised to see two well dressed women walking down the road carefully scrutinizing the ruins of houses as they came along. When they reached our abode they commenced a heated conversation, accompanied with much gesturing and pointing, presently they came inside the ruins to the doorway of our hut and in very broken English began to inform us that this was their home. No one need be surprised to know that they went away shedding many tears and no doubt feeling more embittered towards the Hun.

Another spell of trench duty completed, No. 4 Section again returns to the rest billets in Gorre. From now on-

wards each Section has to do 12 days in the trenches and four out at rest. Instead of one Section always being in the village line this was done away with, and the three Sections in the line held either front line or support positions between Richebourg and Givenchy.

On the return of our Commanding Officer off leave he was immediately followed by the Second-in-Command. Thus my Section Officer was still acting as Second-in-Command. A few days ago, however, he had been placed under arrest for assaulting one of his fellow officers. While in the Officers' Mess one evening he had taken too freely of the contents of a whisky bottle with the result that they could not get him to leave. The Transport Officer attempted to get him out of the mess, but the clenched fist of No. 4 Section's Officer felled him to the floor. He was now enjoying the comforts of a separate billet in the village with two officers of the 1st Battalion Royal West Kents, who were performing the duty of escort pending his trial.

During this spell out of the line two of our N.C.O.'s (Corporals Ford and Searl), returned to England to join a new Company at Grantham. Corporal Humble had been given the first opportunity of returning to Blighty, but strange to say he had refused to leave the 13th Company. The Section was further depleted by Speed and Hinks being sent down to the Machine Gun School at Camiers on a three weeks' course. Another man, Private Bannerman, had joined the signallers a couple of weeks ago. Sergeant McMoran, who had been placed under arrest a few weeks ago, was now at liberty without any serious results from his escapade. Two other men also returned to the Section for duty—Tom Teasdale and Buck Ellis—both of whom had had jobs at the billets in Gorre. I also had to leave my cushy job of runner and join the gun teams when we once more journeyed to the line. My Section took over two positions in the O.B.L., one in George Street and one in Rose trench, and it was in the last-named position that I found myself for the first six days of this spell. Rose trench was the continuation of the front line in the Givenchy sector (Scottish trench), and at the point where our gun position was it was connected to the O.B.L. at right angles. About 200 yards on the left of our post Rose trench was connected by another trench to "Princess Island." In the Festubert Sector there was not an unbroken stretch of breastworks to form the front

line but only a number of outposts which were called islands, and this "Princess Island" was the main one. The wide gaps which occurred between these islands were covered by our machine guns. Our position in Rose trench overlooked the small salient of Givenchy, and the famous Givenchy mine craters were some 200 yards half right from here. We arrived in this position late one afternoon, and to a depth of over 50 yards behind the trench we could not help but notice the great amount of damage that had been done to this end of the O.B.L. An Officer informed us that during the hours of two and four in the afternoon he had counted no less than 80 shells which had burst in this area. This was far from being pleasant news to us. During the night our parapet was grazed by fierce machine gun fire, many of the bullets tearing through the top sand-bag, making sentry duty very uncomfortable.

Each afternoon, commencing at two o'clock, the Boche commenced to strafe our trench at the point where the O.B.L. joined it, giving us many an uncomfortable half-hour. On the completion of six days in this position we were relieved, and crossing over into the Givenchy sector the team I was with took over the position in Maria Redoubt. This was about the worst place for rats round Givenchy, but not quite so bad as certain parts of the O.B.L. Our gun was mounted here in the day-time only, being taken to the close support trench after stand-down each night and was brought back each morning.

The Section was now in charge of a new Officer—Lieut. Crone. On his first visit round the gun positions he had nothing but complaints to lay before the Section Sergeant and we were not favourably impressed from this first acquaintance. He improved considerably, however, as he got to know the men in the Section a little better. Heavy rains soon made the trenches into an awful state—and it was mud wherever you went or whatever you touched. We were all glad when the 12th day of this spell of trench duty arrived and were once more wending our way towards the village of Gorre for another brief spell in the rest billets.

While we were out of the line this time eight of us went through a short course of bombing. We had to be on parade each morning at nine o'clock along with 50 men belonging to the four Infantry Battalions in the Brigade, and our Instructor was the Brigade Bombing Officer. In a maze

of trenches dug in a large field half-way between Gorre and Festubert we performed a number of sham bombing stunts, using tightly folded sand-bags for bombs. An unfortunate accident happened to one of my Section when we were throwing live bombs towards the end of the course. We threw our bombs from behind a wall of sand-bags, and were instructed to keep well behind this while the bombs were being thrown. Roberts was at one end of the barricade, and he must have put his head round the corner to watch the results of the bombs; whatever he was doing, he was hit in the right eye, losing the sight of it.

Our Section Officer, after being under arrest for several weeks, came back to duty, and much to our surprise came out of "clink" with a second pip on his cuff. Leave to Blighty was progressing very slow, only two men going each week. Before returning to the trenches again we were reinforced by two men from the Base—Jack Johnson and Bill Ovens. The latter was a true son of Scotland. For the first four days on going into the trenches again my team held the position called Piccadilly South, which was in a support trench of the same name in the Givenchy sector. While here we had a heavy fall of snow which made the trench, which was a very poor one, in an awful condition.

From here we proceeded to a position about 100 yards to the left of "La Quinque Rue," a part of the line on the left of the Festubert sector. This position was in the middle of a field about 100 yards behind our front line trench ("Front Street"). The only trench we had was some four yards, about 3ft. deep, running from the shelter to the gun platform. Our shelter was only in the course of erection, and the steel half-moon shaped sections of it which were fixed down in a hollow had to be sand-bagged at both ends, leaving half of one end open for a doorway; also two or three layers of sand-bags had to be built up the sides and on the top. Owing to the position being so much exposed to the enemy's lines we could not move about during the day-time, and when we changed sentries we had almost to creep to and from the gun. During the night we all had to set to work sand-bagging our shelter, and at the first signs of daybreak we had to cease and camouflage our work to prevent it being spotted by the Hun. Christmas was drawing very near now, and our artillery were already preparing for delivering their Yuletide bombardments. The

Germans were also making preparations for the upholding of the Festive Season.

In the afternoon of December 22nd the Boche commenced the first of his Xmas bombardments. The straffing started with trench mortar fire and terminated with a shower of 5.9's, and lasted for over two hours. From the first mortar being fired our position was completely surrounded by bursting shells, and more than one trench mortar shell only missed our bivouac by a couple of yards. Our gunners in the front line afterwards informed us that our position was completely blotted out of sight by the clouds of smoke and dust created by the showers of T.M.'s which rained down about us. While this bombardment had been in progress all the infantry in the front line and support had been withdrawn to the O.B.L., leaving only our machine guns and two or three teams of Lewis gunners in the line. The front line was also severely mauled during the strafe, and one huge Minnie (Minenwerfer) landed on top of the shelter used by the Warwicks as a cookhouse, sending dixies and rations flying over into No Man's Land, and utterly destroying the trench for about 15 yards. When the Germans had finished, our artillery commenced a sharp bombardment for about half-an-hour by way of retaliation.

Early on the following morning we were relieved by a team belonging to another Company who had come from the Richebourg sector. We took over one of their positions in Richebourg area, but only remained in it until evening, when we retraced our steps and took over the position in Hart Street again. On the morning of the 24th we had to get busy and prepare for the opening of the festivities at four o'clock in the afternoon. This preliminary was to be of 15 minutes' duration, during which all our artillery would join in extending their greetings to our neighbours across the way. All our machine guns would fire one belt (250 rounds) rapid, and the infantry in the front line 15 rounds rapid. It so happened that I was on sentry at four o'clock, and exact on the hour the rattle of rifle fire came from in front; this was the signal for the music to commence. Our guns had to take their time from the left-hand gun, which was the one I was with, and as I commenced to fire the other guns commenced in quick succession. A few seconds after the first shot was fired our artillery were well under way, and

for a few brief minutes it reminded one of the fierce daily bombardments during the Somme Offensive.

From now until over Xmas day our guns continued to fire short bursts every fifteen minutes, and at certain specified hours sharp bombardments similar to the first one took place. The second one took place at midnight on the 24th, and this time our machine guns each fired two belts (500 rounds); the third commenced at 7 o'clock on Xmas-day morning, the fourth at mid-day, and a fifth at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. During the afternoon our gun broke down; a stud, which helped to keep the box which contained the fuzzee-spring in position on the left-hand side of the gun, had broken off. It was only possible to fire very short bursts, but at 4 o'clock we had 500 rounds to fire, and the only means we had of doing this was for some one to hold the spring box in position while the gun was being fired. The Section Officer came to my gun for the purpose of firing the two belts this time, Corporal Humble took over the work of No. 2, and myself, who was on sentry at the time, took a firm grip of the defective piece of the gun to keep it in place while the 500 rounds were being fired. For the minute or two that I had to hold on to the gun my ears were within a few inches and on a level with the feed block, and the sharp crack of the bullets as they were fired at the rate of 500 per minute resounded so forcibly in my ears, the right one especially, that I was rendered almost stone deaf for some time. It was several weeks before I regained the full use of my right ear.

On the approach of Christmas strange to say our rations had fallen off in quantity and quality. When we brought our several bags from the dump in La Plantain on Xmas-eve we found on opening them nothing but hard biscuits and bully beef. Some dinner for us to sit down to on the morrow. My team fared much better than the other three, however, for in addition to the several parcels which members of my team had received on Xmas-eve, Cooper, who was carrying on the job of Section Runner, brought us three loaves of bread which had been given to him by one of his mates in the 14th Bn. Royal Warwickshire Regiment. The Battalion evidently were faring much better than we machine gunners.

The Germans did not take our bombardments sitting down, and on Xmas Day and Boxing Day large numbers of 5.9's smashed down our breastworks inflicting a number of

casualties upon the Warwicks. One of our guns in Rose Trench had a very narrow escape on Xmas Day; a Minnie fell on the next traverse and blew it completely away. In the afternoon of the 26th we heard the welcome news that the Section was being relieved the same evening, and that the whole of the Company and the Battalions in the 13th Infantry Brigade was going out for a rest of 16 days on the 30th. By nine o'clock that night all our teams had been relieved, and with a deal of whistling, singing and shouting we were once more marched back to the village of Gorre.

Since we first arrived in these sectors in October our casualties had been very light indeed, only some half-dozen men in the Company having been wounded, none of whom belonged to my Section. Quite a number of men, however, had been admitted into hospital through sickness, trench feet and trench fever.

### CHAPTER XIII.

#### TRENCH FATIGUES, A RAID, AND A SPELL IN HOSPITAL.

**W**HEN the remainder of the Company came out of the trenches on the 30th of December, 1916, we took over some fresh billets in another part of the village. My Section was accommodated in a long low-roofed loft, and the only fault we had to find with our new lodgings was that the roof and walls had too many ventilation holes in them. To gain access into our billet we had to climb up a very rickety old ladder which reached to the doorway; the entrance to the loft was about 4ft. high.

At this time our comfort was also further enhanced by the number of blankets allowed to each man being increased to three. We had 16 days before us in which to enjoy the comfort that this meant to us, then we should have to leave them behind and take up our posts on the cheerless fire-step again. Preparations were being made for a Company dinner on New Year's Day to be held in a large hut not far from our billets, and followed in the evening by a boxing tournament, which was being arranged by some of the Company's boxing enthusiasts. We had quite a number of good boxers, three of whom were in No. 4 Section—Sergeant Smith, Privates Aston and Cruyer. Smith was one of the finest boxers in the 5th Division. The other three Sections

and the transport drivers were also to be well represented in the ring. Our Signal Section was to be represented by the Corporal-in-charge.

On New Year's-eve the Village Estaminets did a roaring trade. Bottles of beer and wines were purchased in large numbers for consumption in the billets later on in the evening. At midnight we were visited by our two Section Officers, who also brought some bottles of wine with them in which to drink the health of the Section. The Section contained quite a number of Scotchmen, and Hogmanhae was heartily sung at the dawn of the New Year. New Year's Day was observed as a holiday. At 1.30 in the afternoon we all trooped into our improvised dining hall to eat of the dinner that had been prepared for us. This banquet was not on a very elaborate scale, and the "tinned" plum puddings and barrels of beer were the only extra items to the usual army menu. The meat and vegetables were made up of the previous two or three days' supply and the issue for several days to come. Thus to have this Company dinner we had to forfeit the greater part of our dinners for the next few days. This was the first time the whole of the Company had been together since we journeyed from the scene of the Somme Offensive at the end of September, 1916. At this dinner the waiters were our own Company Officers.

On the second day of the New Year we commenced with daily parades. We had almost forgotten what these were so few had we had during the last few months. We had two Sundays out of the line and likewise two church parades. These were the first religious services I had had the privilege of attending for over four months.

While we were having this Brigade rest we all had to hand in our rifles and bayonets and draw "Webley" revolvers in their places. This change had been greatly needed in the M.G.C. A rest of 16 days from trench duty soon passes by, and late in the afternoon of the 15th January No. 4 Section was once again taking over positions in Rose Trench, George Street and the O.B.L.; my team taking over one of the two positions in Rose Trench. We were having some very severe weather now, and the numerous streams which used to flow a few yards in the rear of the breastworks were frozen solid, as also was the water in the miriads of shell holes. The tanks from which we drew our drinking water were rendered useless, and water for making

our tea with was obtained by melting blocks of ice cut out of the frozen streams or shell holes.

In November last year we had all been served out with leather jerkins and a few with wool coats. The latter, however were not suitable for work in the very frequently muddy trenches, and the serviceable leather coat was preferred by the man in the trenches. During our periods of two hours' duty on the fire step on these bitter cold nights we were very thankful to have this extra protection. We had also been supplied with trench gloves; these were kept suspended round the neck by a tape, the ends of which were attached to the gloves. If only we could have had something that would have protected our feet, for it was almost an impossibility to keep them warm. Every day some of us would take a stroll round the trenches in search of firewood to enable us to keep our brazier going both night and day. Duck-boards and the timber used for rivetting the walls of the trenches made excellent fuel, and during this terribly cold period large quantities of these were demolished and burned to the consternation of our Pioneer Officers and the Brigade Staff. During the day-time we had to exercise great care to ensure that our fires made very little smoke, as a thick cloud of smoke would very soon bring a shower of whizz-bangs to scatter our fire, and in all probability the bunch of men in the vicinity to the four points of the compass. While in the trenches every man was supposed to wash and shave every day. Most of the men usually carried out the first part of this order, but very often it only took the form of what was termed a "lather brush wash." Shaving was performed once in two or three days according to the growth of the soldier's beard. During this spell in Rose Trench the gunners of the same team as myself became very particular about the daily wash, and each afternoon (after the Hymn of Hate had ceased, of course), with a few exceptions, we all had a good wash in a tin of hot water. Our washing bowl took the form of a 2-gallon petrol tin with the top cut off.

Throughout the long winter nights the German machine gunners grazed the tops of our breastworks with their fire the same as when we were in the trenches between October and December last, and narrow escapes from being hit were numerous. While Holmes was working on the top of the breastworks in George Street a machine gun bullet cut a

hole through the back of his leather jerkin and tunic but without doing any further damage. George Robinson, who was with the same gun as myself, had a narrow escape from a bullet which passed through the top layer of bags of the breastwork, and only missing his head by a very narrow margin.

Each afternoon between two and four Jerry subjected our trench to a sharp bombardment which we termed "the strafe of hate"; this usually resulted in nothing worse than having a few yards of our defences pushed over. One afternoon, however, one of our number received a nasty wound in the left arm. He had only relieved me at the gun position 15 minutes previously. During the last 30 minutes of my two hours spell of sentry duty shells had been bursting both back and front of the gun position sending pieces of metal flying in all directions, a large quantity of which came into the trench burying themselves into the walls, several only a few inches from my head. While this strafe was on I got into conversation with an infantryman of the Warwickshire Regiment, in the course of which he informed me that he had lost five brothers in the War and that he was the only son left in the family. For some reason or other this period of our trench duty stretched into 14 days. Our trench companions, the men of the 14th and 15th Battalions Royal Warwicks Regiment only did spells of six days in the trenches and six days rest. The infantrymen who took over the first period of trench duty were relieved for their six days rest, and when they returned again they were very much surprised to find the same machine gunners in the trenches as were there 13 days ago. Some of them passed the remark that we must have taken over our positions for the "duration of war."

On the 14th day the weather became much warmer, and towards evening it commenced to rain. About six o'clock we were relieved by the gunners of another Section, but instead of being at liberty to make our way at once to our rest billets in Gorre we had a number of steel girders to get across from Rose Trench to George Street, a distance of nearly 400 yards. To transport these girders, the longest of which weighed several hundred pounds, by hand across a stretch of land pitted with uncountable numbers of shell craters, across ditches and disused trenches, and with German machine gun bullets whizzing past unpleasantly close,

was no small job. After a deal of grousing and grumbling eight of us got the heaviest hoisted on to our shoulders, whilst two other men lifted one of the two smaller ones. A quick thaw having set in during the day made it very hard going, but after much slipping and sliding, manœuvring to get past the deep and wide shell holes, and accompanied by an unending flow of strong army language, we at last arrived at our destination in George Street, where we promptly heaved our burden off our shoulders on to the ground to become almost buried in the half-frozen mud. A second and similar journey completed our fatigue duty, after which we were at liberty to make all haste to the village of Gorre, where we hoped to be free from trench duties and fatigues for three whole days and nights. Our hopes for unmolested rest and quietness were dashed to the ground, however, in the afternoon of the second day of our rest period. The Section had to parade at eight o'clock that night wearing tin hats, respirators and equipment for fatigue duty in the trenches. On arriving at La Plantain we each had to take up a load of corrugated iron or section of a steel shelter (the latter had been nick-named by Tommy "baby elephants"). Half of the men had to proceed to Princess Island, and the other half to Rose Trench. I accompanied the Princess Island party with a load of three sheets of corrugated iron resting on my head. It was on such commissions as this that we got to know the protecting powers of our steel head-wear.

While wending our way slowly down Yellow Road we were held up several times by the enemy's fierce machine gun fire which was sweeping the road at a dangerous altitude. Crossing from the O.B.L. into George Street we followed the latter to the right until we came to the communication trench connecting it to Princess Island. This trench was too narrow to allow of us walking down it with our awkward loads, so we had to take to the open. A couple of minutes walk brought us to the breastworks which formed the island. The material which we were struggling along with had to be dumped at the extreme left end of the island where a machine gun post had just recently been established. Very little shelter was at the disposal of the gunners, and the sheets of iron, &c., which we had brought were for building another shelter. The work of erecting this shelter would fall to the lot of the team holding the position, and

until the work was completed their usual nightly routine of duty of two hours sentry and four hours sleep would be varied by a spell of two hours work and only two hours sleep. This position was very much exposed, and as no movement during the day was possible all the work would have to be done at night time. A second journey to this post with another load of material completed the fatigue, and by midnight we had all arrived back to our billets where an issue of rum awaited us.

On the night of February 2nd my Section took over the positions in the Givenchy Sector, and for the first four days my team was in Piccadilly Trench. A very severe frost had again set in and the walls of our trench were frozen as hard as flint. During the long cold nights we kept ourselves warm by attacking our granite-like parapet with picks in an endeavour to cut out a new gun platform, but very little headway could be made. Trench mortar batteries were always very active in the Givenchy Sector, and in addition to the Stokes' gun and the 60-pounder a monster mortar gun had recently been brought into the line which fired a 9½ in. shell standing about 4ft. high, and had a range of over 1,500 yards. This "Tock Emma" had been nick-named the "Flying Pig." On striking the ground the shell buried itself nearly ten feet in the ground, and about half-a-minute would elapse before it exploded, with disastrous results to the German earthworks and its defenders. The 60-pounder trench mortar shell took the shape of a big ball on the end of a stick about 2ft. long, and was called by our men "the toffee apple." It was a very unreliable gun, being as dangerous to us as it was to the enemy, for at least half of the shells fired fell, not on the Boche's trenches, but on our own. The famous "Stokes' gun," however, was the king of trench mortar guns. Shells from this gun were fired with great rapidity and accuracy, and should a German machine gun post be spotted and shelled by this vicious little weapon its fate was sealed.

Early one morning just after it had got daylight we were all sat round a blazing and almost smokeless fire inside our shelter when an Officer of the 1st Battalion R. West Kents came dashing down the trench to our post and, putting his head through the entrance of our abode, asked us if we wanted blowing out of the d——n trench, if not, to stay the cloud of smoke which he said was rising from our bivouac.

We were at a loss to understand this until our sentry at the gun drew our attention to a cloud of steam rising from the roof of our shelter. The heat from our fire was thawing the frozen bags of earth which composed the roof, and for some time after this occurrence we had to keep the fire outside until our happy home had cooled down.

In the early hours on the morning of the 5th our trenches were heavily shelled for nearly two hours, resulting in several casualties among the Kents.

Late in the afternoon of the 6th we removed to another position called Piccadilly North, situated about 50 yards behind the front line trench. A deep dug-out had been dug for the use of the gunners holding this post, but when we got down the dozen or more steps into this underground chamber our lighted candle reflected on a pool of water, and on further investigation we discovered that our home for the next few days resembled a well with a boarded floor built a few inches above the water. To prevent the water from flooding over the floor a hand pump had been installed at one end of the dug-out, and the team of gunners whom we had just relieved warned us that if we did not work the pump at least ten minutes every hour we should very soon be flooded out. This natural flow of water underneath our beds supplied us with all the water we required both for washing and drinking purposes. It was as clear as that in any of the shell-holes or brooks, so we had no qualm about using it for our frequent brews of tea or char as it was more frequently termed by Tommy Atkins.

While we were at this position an accident occurred in a trench mortar pit not many yards away. One of the 60-pounder "toffee apple" shells exploded in the pit killing three members of the team and severely wounding the remaining two.

On the 11th February we were relieved from Piccadilly North, and very glad we were too to get away from the damp dungeon-like dug-out. Until daybreak on the morning following we took over a reserve position from which we did overhead fire all through the night.

Preparations were being made for a "daylight bombing raid" into the enemy's trenches in the Givenchy Sector in the afternoon at three o'clock, and during the morning we had to again move our gun, this time into Park Lane, the front line trench on the left of the craters. For a shelter

we had the use of a cellar underneath the ruins of a house, which was named on our trench maps "French Farm." Also accommodated in this cellar were a number of men belonging to the 13th Trench Mortar Battery waiting patiently for the afternoon's performance to begin. All the sixteen guns of the 13th Machine Gun Company had been brought into the trenches for this stunt. Of my Section three guns were to be engaged on barrage fire, one on Princess Island and two in Rose Trench, whilst the gun I was with was being held in reserve in the front line trench in case the Boche made a counter raid. No. 2 Section had their guns mounted on the Givenchy craters, and while the raid was in progress they had to cover our infantrymen with their fire. Sharp on three o'clock our artillery opened out on the German front line trench, gradually working its way towards their supports, thus allowing our infantrymen to enter the front line. The idea of the raid was to do as much damage as possible to the enemy's defences and dug-outs, and to get back as quickly as possible.

In order to make a good job of the destruction of the dug-outs and sapheads a number of engineers accompanied the West Kents, taking with them a large amount of explosives. From the top of our shelter we watched the Kents making their way across No Man's Land behind our heavy barrage of shell fire, and presently the report of bombs and muffled explosives could be heard. The Germans were ten minutes or more before they commenced to retaliate with their artillery and machine guns. Our raiding party sustained few casualties in crossing over to the Boche trench and in carrying out their work, but on returning to our front line a lot of them were caught in the German barrage. The 1st Battalion R. West Kents, who supplied the raiding party, had about 40—50 men killed or wounded, but the raid, however, was a complete success. While the raid was in progress a runner belonging to the Kents was killed whilst talking to two of our gunners in Park Lane by a shell which burst in the trench.

On the Givenchy craters No. 2 Section of my Company had been hard hit by the German shell fire, having had one man killed and 18 wounded. In Rose Trench my Section had had one man wounded. For several hours after the raid Jerry maintained a heavy shell fire on our trenches, which again proved disastrous to No. 2 Section. One of their teams

was making its way down the road leading from Givenchy Village on their way to the billets in Gorre when a shell burst in the roadway just as they were passing Moat Farm, killing one man and wounding two. Their casualties now totalled two killed and 15 wounded. When everything was normal once more we removed our gun into the O.B.L. (Festubert Sector).

For some days past I had been troubled with sceptic sores on both hands, and my mates had been on to me for not reporting sick. My hands had now got so bad that it was impossible for me to work the gun, so on the morning of the 13th February I left the team and made my way to the Advanced Aid Post lower down the O.B.L. towards the village of Festubert. Here I got my hands dressed, and when I came out they both had the appearance of being encased in white boxing gloves. I had also been given a pass signed by the doctor giving me permission to return to Gorre. It was early in the afternoon before I left the trenches accompanied by one of our Sergeants who was going on leave to Blighty. This Sergeant had just recently been transferred to my Company from the West Kents, and was called by the same name as myself. He was familiarly called Toby Russell, a nick-name with which I was eventually christened. The following morning I went to the Advanced Dressing Station on the outskirts of the village to have my hands attended to. Here the Medical Officer ordered me to return to my billets, pack up all my belongings, and come back in the afternoon, when I would be conveyed by the R.A.M.C. Horse Ambulance to the 14th Field Ambulance in Bethune.

On arriving at the F.A. I was taken into the ward where some 30 men suffering from either wounds or sickness were receiving medical attention. I stayed here for six days, during which time my hands got worse instead of better. Each morning at half-past ten all patients, with the exception of one or two bad cases, had to stand at the foot of their beds while the Doctor made his daily round and gave his orders to the R.A.M.C. Orderlies what treatment was required for each patient. The dressings that he ordered for my hands were never the same two mornings running. First it would be a dry dressing, then iodine bathing or a salve, none of which appeared to be doing any good. Towards the last day that I was here he began to talk of using the knife to

the first finger of my left hand which was in an awful condition. He did not resort to this last remedy, however, but sent me along with several other men by motor ambulance to the Corps Rest Station at Lillers. This was not a hospital but a camp where the Tommies were sent for a week or two after coming out of hospital before being sent back to their units. Fifty per cent. of the men here should have been receiving proper treatment in a Base Hospital, instead of that they were engaged every morning in threading strips of green baize on rolls of wire netting to be used by the artillery and on M.G. emplacements for camouflage purposes and only saw the Doctor once in two days. While here I came across several men belonging to my own Company who had been wounded during the Givenchy raid. During the six days that I was at this Rest Camp I saw a Doctor twice, and on the second time he marked me for admission to the Casualty Clearing Station. The C.C.S. was in the same town as the Rest Camp, and a minute's ride in a motor ambulance brought us to it. On arriving here I found myself in a building that had all the appearances of a hospital. There was not sufficient beds for all the patients, but a lot of the new arrivals, including myself, were made very comfortable on beds made up on stretchers. Late in the afternoon all the patients were seen by the Doctor, and on this interview he decided who were cases for transmission to a Base Hospital.

Arriving at a C.C.S. is the critical stage in a wounded or sick soldier's hopes of eventually arriving in Blighty. Once he gets past here he has a good chance of boarding a hospital ship before long, and more so if heavy casualties are occurring up the line. After we had all seen the Doctor a list of names was read out of those who were to be put on the Red Cross train the following morning, February 27th, my name being included. Up to my arrival at the C.C.S. I had carried my equipment and pack from place to place, but before boarding the train all equipment and kit had to be handed over to the storekeeper, after first taking out any personal belongings that the patient wished to keep. The batch of wounded and sick Tommies, including many stretcher cases, were all comfortably accommodated in a luxuriant Red Cross train by midday. Each man had attached to his tunic a label bearing his name, regtl. number, regiment and the nature of his wound or ailment.

The journey to Etaples, which was one of our large Military Bases, was accomplished in about 10 hours. At the station the train was met by a convoy of ambulances in which we were all conveyed to one or other of the numerous hospitals. I was taken along with about 30 other men to No. 7 Canadian General Hospital. Although it was midnight and very cold all the patients who could walk had to go to the bath-house and have a bath before being taken to a ward, after which we were supplied with new underclothing and pyjama suits. All our khaki was taken from us and rolled into a bundle, but beforehand our attendants told us to write our names and unit on a slip of paper to be placed in the breast pocket of the tunic. This was to ensure that we received our own suits on being discharged from Hospital, but there are tricks to be learned in every trade or profession, and as a Base Hospital is a place where new clothing abounds in large quantities, this slip of paper was omitted to be placed in the pocket by more men than myself. At last after being served with a mug of hot cocoa we were comfortably tucked in bed between clean white sheets. Being the first time for a year that I had laid between sheets, and feeling fresher and cleaner than I had done for many a long weary month, I was very soon sound asleep. All the patients had to be washed by 7 o'clock each morning, and shortly after 6 o'clock all the up patients were bustling about taking round washing basins to all the bed patients, including us newcomers. Breakfast was brought into the ward soon after, following which the two nurses, assisted by the up patients, went round straightening all the beds and making everything look smart and tidy for when the Doctor came round. The Doctor came into the ward about 9.30; after his visit several of us newcomers were allowed to get up; and for the first and I hope for the last time I donned a suit of the familiar hospital blue. For the rest of the morning the nurses, ably assisted by several Tommies, were kept busy dressing the wounds of the patients. There were several very seriously wounded men in the ward; one in the next bed to mine had a big hole in the small of his back. Another had lost his left leg and had also been hit by a big piece of shell on the back of his left hand, which had been rendered useless, whilst a third patient had lost his left arm.

The treatment which I now began to receive very quickly began to heal my hands, and by the third day my right hand

was quite better. By the time I had been in No. 7 Canadian General Hospital seven days my left hand was also better, and on the 8th March I was marked for admission to the Convalescent Camp. Before leaving I paid a visit to the Hospital Clothing Stores, where the storekeepers were unable to produce the khaki which I had handed in on my arrival, so that I received a complete new rig-out. In the afternoon I left the Hospital in company with several other men for the Convalescent Camp. Here my stay was even shorter than in the Hospital, and two days later I was trudging from Etaples to the Machine Gun Corps Base Depôt at Camiers, a distance of five to six miles.

#### CHAPTER XIV.

THE STORMING OF VIMY RIDGE (EASTER, 1917).

**D**URING the first week of my stay in the Machine Gun Corps Base Depôt I was in what was termed the Convalescent Coy., after which period I was marked fit for duty again and put into another Company, from which I hoped to be sent back to my own unit in due course. For another week I was on parade each day, going through a short course on the Vicker's gun and on the working of the German machine gun, a captured one being used for this purpose.

At last I was detailed to join the 13th Machine Gun Company, and was forthwith struck off all parades. Men under orders to proceed up the line were not allowed to leave the precincts of the Camp, and to enforce this order a roll of such men was called several times a day. Several days went by before I left the Base, during which time I was doing nothing but dodge fatigues, but occasionally it was not possible to get out of them. One fatigue which I cliqued for was to dig up a plot of ground on the edge of the Camp to be converted into an allotment for growing potatoes. Definite orders were at last given to me to be ready to leave the Camp early on the morning of the 30th March. I was to be accompanied by a youth of my Company, who had been sent down to the Base several months ago on account of being under nineteen years of age. He had just attained that age and the Authorities were losing no time in returning him to his Unit.

Arriving at Etaples station we boarded a troop train, the usual cattle trucks, and by midday we had commenced our

journey. Twenty-four hours later our train pulled into the station of St. Pol, where we had to leave the train and complete our journey by road. On making enquiries I learned that the 5th Division were out at rest and billeted in villages some eight miles away. After a long weary tramp we eventually came across the 13th Company in a mining village called Auchel, arriving just in time for tea. I was heartily welcomed by my old comrades in arms, and went into billets with three of the old boys—Aston, Holmes and Robinson.

The Company had been out of the line three weeks, during which time they had been practising for the coming Easter event—the storming of Vimy Ridge. I had evidently just arrived back in time to take a part in this stunt, for the Company was already packed up and ready for making tracks to the famous ridge. During my absence the Section had been reinforced by three or four new men, a welcome addition to our numbers.

Sunday, the day after my return, was April the 1st, Fool's Day, and my worthy friend, Private Holmes, was very smartly made an April Fool. He was detailed by an N.C.O. to parade in "fighting order" dress after breakfast in the transport lines and accompany the limbers which were said to be going on in advance. When he arrived at the transport field there was no sign of moving, and the drivers all enjoyed a good laugh at his expense. On Monday morning, the 2nd April, however, our departure from the village of Auchel took place in earnest. It was a very cold morning, and before we had been marching half-an-hour a regular snow blizzard had set in, and the roads were soon several inches deep with snow. This did not improve the condition of the roads for marching along. For five hours we struggled on in the face of the gale until we came to a large wood in the shelter of which sufficient tents had been pitched to accommodate the whole of the 13th Infantry Brigade. The ground had only been very roughly cleared, and inside nearly all the tents were left tree stumps and roots, all of which had to be cut away before we could lay down for our night's rest. The whole Brigade was remaining here until the day before the attack, but one Officer and twelve men of my Company, including myself, had to resume the journey to the scene of the coming onslaught the following morning.

By 10 a.m. our little party was marching along the now very slushy roads leading towards Vimy. As we approached

nearer to the line the roads became more and more congested with traffic, and at last we had to take to a cross-country track as it was almost impossible to make any progress on the high road. The roads for several miles behind the line were dotted with two unending strings of motor lorries, one making towards the line with munitions and stores, and the second one, consisting of empty ones, making the return journey. In addition large numbers of horse transport waggons were making their way on the outside edges of the road, and amid this maze of traffic could be seen batches of infantrymen, and even whole Battalions, splashing through the mud and slush, and in turn being coated from head to foot by the mud thrown up as from a fountain by the passing motors, &c.

At 2 o'clock in the afternoon we arrived at Mount St. Eloi, where we rested in a field while the Officer made enquiries at the Canadian Headquarters as to where we were to be billeted for the night. During his absence we contented ourselves with scraping off our clothing the thick coating of mud which we had collected on the march. The 5th Division was now attached to the Canadian Army Corps, having been lent to the Canadians to assist them in their offensive, which was to commence on Easter Monday, the 9th April. On the return of our Officer we picked up our equipment and went into a barnlike building at the foot of Mount St. Eloi hill. This hill was surmounted by a tall tower, now considerably damaged by shell fire, which could be seen for miles around, making an excellent land mark. Tom Teasdale and myself climbed to the top, but were immediately ordered to make tracks back again by a sentry. Being under observation from the enemy's lines on Vimy Ridge, no one was allowed on top. This tower was frequently shelled by the Boche, and we had been back in our billet about half-an-hour or so when three long range shells came over and burst some 50 to 100 yards away. Our billet was heaped up with dirty straw, old tins and rubbish, and some time had to be spent in clearing it away before we could roll ourselves up in our great coats for the night.

The next day, April 4th, we went into the trenches at Neuville St. Vaast, and in a cellar in this ruined village we had to make our home for the next few days. The trenches were in a fearfully wet condition, the front line trenches being up to the waist in water in places. Our party of men had come into the line to make the gun positions ready for when

the Company came in on the 8th April. On our first night in the trenches our rations went astray, but the Company-Sergeant-Major of the 13th (Canadian) Machine Gun Company helped us over the difficulty by letting us have what rations he could spare—bully beef and biscuits.

The next day when rations came up the men who went for them returned with two separate rations, the explanation being that after they had got our own some Canadian soldiers were calling out for the ration party of the 13th Machine Gun Company, and quite naturally they responded to the call. Presently, however, we had a visit from the Canadian Sergeant-Major who was hunting for some lost rations belonging to his Company. The second lot of rations our men had claimed belonged to the Canadians 13th M.G. Co., and we had very politely to hand them over to the rightful owners. To distinguish us from our Colonial comrades we were termed the "Imperials."

Our huge parks of artillery which had been massed on the Vimy front, many of the guns almost wheel to wheel, kept up a continuous murderous shell-fire night and day. Sixty-pounder guns had been dragged to concealed positions only a thousand yards behind the front line ready for opening out a second barrage on the retreating Boche when the time arrived. As soon as it was dusk on the second night that we were in the line we made our way to a disused trench behind the front line, where we set to work on digging out four gun platforms and deepening the trench.

All night long German Vercy Lights soared into the air lighting up the trenches and the barren "No Man's Land" with their brilliant glare. About every half-hour or so the enemy would fire a whole bunch of rockets into the air which on bursting sent out a big shower of yellowish tinted star-shaped lights. Immediately after the discharge of these rockets, or canary lights, their artillery would open out a fierce bombardment on some portion of our entrenchments from which we gathered that they were artillery signals. Every time the Boche fired these signals, "wind-up signals" as we termed them, we kept on the alert for the squall of shells that was sure to follow. We were left unmolested at our work, however, until we were preparing for returning to Neuville St. Vaast, when a hurricane of shell-fire swept the area where we were working. The old trench we were working in provided no shelter against shell fire, being only

three feet deep and non-existent in places. About 100 yards away in the main communication trench was a dug-out, to which we made our way through the showers of bursting shells, happily without sustaining any casualties. Some of our night's work was upset by this bombardment which would have to be put right when we returned the next night. The communication trench between the front line and the village of St. Vaast had also been shelled with 5.9's, several of which had fallen right in the trench and destroying it for several yards.

On arriving at the ruins beneath which we lived we found the entrance blocked up by a heap of debris caused by the bursting of a big shell. To reach our cellar we had to climb out of the trench and over the heap of bricks and stone. When this shell burst outside our home, we had one of our number seriously wounded—the Officer's servant. This cellar in which we stayed was not an exceptionally safe abode, for just previous to our party taking possession a large shell had pierced through the far end, killing and wounding a number of Officers who were in it at the time. The following afternoon we had a quantity of barbed wire and large iron screw stakes to take up to the scene of our evening's employment. On finishing the gun positions that night we had to put in front a large semi-circle barrier of barbed wire to prevent our own troops and German prisoners, of which the Canadians were hoping to take a large number, from running into the fire of the machine guns. All the time we were out working the Germans kept up a steady shell fire, but we were able to finish our work before daylight. The barking of our own artillery was incessant, and the ground beneath our feet fairly shook at times from the concussion of the hundreds of guns which were thundering away in chorus preparing the way for the grand assault.

Having now completed the four gun positions myself and four other men stayed in a dug-out close by, to prevent any Officers who might come round the line looking for machine gun posts claiming them. Late in the afternoon our Officer brought up a party of Canadians who he said were taking over our positions, much to our surprise. That night we had to commence on another set of gun positions in the support line, and as this was our last night we had to have them finished before daylight. Starting work soon after dusk and being favoured with very little attention from the Boche

artillery, we managed to get them quite ready shortly before it began to get light. Our part in connection with this Easter stunt was now finished, unless we were claimed for any other work later on.

Early on the morning of the 8th April we retraced our steps to Mt. St. Eloi, where we found accommodation in a field to which our transport was going to be brought later on.

The 13th Infantry Brigade, comprising the 1st Batt. K.O.S.B., 1st Batt. R.W. Kents, 14th and 15th Batts. R. Warwicks, and the 13th M.G. Company, was now in the trenches facing the German positions on Vimy Ridge; the only Imperial Troops, as our overseas comrades called us, to advance shoulder to shoulder with them within a few hours over this dominating Ridge. Very late on that night our party was called out to take up a supply of hand grenades to the Company. Each man's load consisted of about a dozen of these infernal bombs. Before starting on our journey we carefully examined the pins in each of the grenades, making sure that none were liable to work out while we were carrying them. Thousands of Canadian troops were moving into the line, and our progress along the specially taped out infantry track across the dark bleak country was necessarily slow. We were accompanied by our Chaplain, who had joined our Company only a few days ago, and was the first we had ever had. He had insisted on being allowed to accompany the boys over the top, and was now proceeding to the trenches to have his wish.

Before we arrived at the Company Headquarters he had relieved four of our men of their rifles, and was jogging along with two slung over either shoulder. We found our Headquarters in a trench along the side of a sunken road. The latter was being shelled as we entered it by 5.9's. Our Company-Sergeant-Major was on the look out for us, and had a party of men waiting to take over our load of bombs. The 1st Battalion K.O.S.B. were making their way down this road at the time when a muffled explosion occurred in the long line of men, followed by a call for the stretcher bearers. On making enquiries I learned that one of the bombs carried by one of the infantrymen had exploded, seriously wounding the man. Every man when going into the line to take part in an attack usually carried a couple of the famous "Mills'" bombs in his haversack.

In the shelter of this sunken road eight tanks were lined up in readiness for the coming attack. It was behind these iron war chariots that we sheltered from the showers of shrapnel bullets, and pieces of shell coming from the barrage of bursting shells which was raining round about us. On receiving orders to make tracks back to the transport we lost no time in carrying it out, as none of us desired to be caught unnecessarily in the hurricane of German shell-fire which would be sure to sweep the support and reserve lines during the attack. It was close on 3 o'clock on the morning of the 9th, Easter Monday, that we arrived back to the transport lines; two and a half hours later the storming of Vimy Ridge would be in full swing. Laying our ground sheets on the sodden ground and wrapping ourselves in a great coat and one blanket which we obtained from the Stores we laid down to secure a few hours sleep, snuggling close together like a flock of sheep for warmth. I had been asleep some little time when I woke up to find it was both raining and snowing. Water was trickling down my neck and was steadily soaking through my blanket and great coat; it was also finding its way underneath me. In spite of climatic conditions, however, the terrific roar of our massed artillery heralded forth the opening of the Vimy-Arras Offensive. I had yet another two hours sleep amid the thundering of our artillery before rising from my wet and now muddy bed. The rumble of our guns was now more distant, all our field artillery having now advanced behind our quickly moving infantry over the crest of the ridge, leaving only a number of long range 6in. naval guns still firing from positions near our camp. Directly after breakfast we went into Mt. St. Eloi in quest of news. We soon learned from runners who had come down the line that the attack had been a big success, the Huns having been taken completely by surprise and our men were now on the far side of Vimy Ridge and still advancing. The hundreds of Boche prisoners who were being brought down the line and put into the several large prisoner-of-war cages which had been constructed round about here, testified to the completeness of our quite apparent victory. All round these barbed wire enclosures where the German prisoners were being kept for the time being, groups of Tommies had collected and were bargaining with them for the possession of souvenirs, giving in exchange a few hard army biscuits, a tin of bully beef, or even one or

two of their cherished stock of fags. These German souvenirs consisted of their pancake-shaped hats, gas respirators which many of the prisoners had still slung over their shoulders, the buttons off their tunics, coins, purses, rings, &c. What jewelry the Germans had possessed, however, had mostly been appropriated by the Tommies in the line long before they reached these cages. During the morning the atmosphere cleared sufficient to allow our observation balloons to ascend and observe the doings of our troops and the retreating enemy on the far side of the now British-possessed Vimy Ridge.

In the afternoon one of these balloons broke loose from its moorings. The two Observation Officers who were in it immediately jumped out, falling like two stones for some distance before their life-saving parachutes opened out and checked their downward descent. A strong west wind was blowing which carried the two men floating in mid-air as far as the Ridge, nearly three miles away, before they touched *terra firma*. Anti-aircraft guns were now being fired furiously at the quickly disappearing runaway balloon in an effort to destroy it, but without success, and it very soon passed out of sight many miles behind the German lines.

In the evening our little party moved into some tents erected in the woods between Villers-au-bois and Mt. St. Eloi, where we remained until joined by the Company which came out of the line on April 11th.

The Company had been very lucky during the attack, our casualties on the 9th and 10th being two killed and about six wounded. Of the killed one was our Sergeant-Major and the other was a gunner of No. 1 Section. Our Sergeant-Major was killed by a shell whilst leading a party of men carrying ammunition to the advanced guns. Among the wounded was our newly-arrived Padre, who had been hit by a piece of shrapnel shortly after the commencement of the attack. My Section only had one man wounded.

## CHAPTER XV.

LENS—APRIL, 1917.

**O**N the 12th April, the day after the Company came out of the line, we moved into some farm buildings in the deserted village of Villers-au-Bois, and very pleased we were, too, to get out of the wet, miserable wood. We

had been in these billets several days when one morning we were informed that a "pay parade" would take place in the afternoon. Parade in the afternoon we certainly did, but it was not for the purpose of receiving a few francs for services rendered, but in heavy marching order ready for moving elsewhere. This order cancelling our parade for pay was only read out to us while we were having our mid-day meal of bully-stew and biscuits.

Our pilgrimage took us once more into the wooded regions outside Mt. St. Eloi. Not a tent or cover of any description was at our disposal, and every yard of the wood was literally choked with brush-wood and creepers. Our Officer informed us that no billets were available for the Company; we therefore had to make the best of a bad job and grin and bide it. After clearing some of the brush-wood we erected some rough shelters with waterproof sheets, each to shelter two or three men. Holmes, Gall Haigh and myself shared the same poor little shelter that night, and early next morning we were roused from our slumbers by a steady fall of rain which was causing several small rivulets to run through our bed area. Before the second night my Section was furnished with a large tarpaulin sheet with which to make a bivouac and one small bell tent, improving considerably the condition and comfort of our "billet."

Our rations were now as scanty and as poor as it was possible to have them. Hard biscuits, jam, cheese, bacon (too salty to eat), bully beef and MacConnachie's tinned rations constituted our assortment of food, but occasionally our commissariat tantalized us with the sight of a single 2lb. loaf of bread as one day's ration for about 28 men. A large Canadian Y.M.C.A. Canteen which was now open just outside Mt. St. Eloi, kept a plentiful supply of assorted biscuits, and to this hut we all flocked to spend a few francs on purchasing a stock of these packet biscuits to tide us over our ration famine. A long queue of hundreds of men belonging to all branches of the Army could always be seen lined up outside this canteen during the hours that it was open, especially if they were displaying their advertising placard "Plenty of Biscuits, Chocolate and Cigarettes." We sometimes had to wait as long as one and even two hours before we reached the counter, but Tommy did not mind this so long as he got what he required when he got there.

The advance of the infantry to a depth of over five miles which had been accomplished by the great attack which commenced on the 9th, had left our heavy artillery too far behind to give any support for further assaults. Canadian troops were now on the outskirts of Lens, the French coal-mining district, but before any more attacks could be launched our heavy artillery had to be moved forward and light railways laid across the newly-won and badly mutilated ground for the transport of heavy shells to the guns. Each day that the 13th Machine Gun Company was lying in reserve in this wood we had to supply a party of men to work with the Canadian Engineers engaged in laying down a light railway track beyond the battered village of Souchez. One half of the Company worked one day and rested the next, their place being taken by the second half of the Company. The work allotted to us machine gunners was either preparing the ground ready for the rails to be laid or loading bogey wagons with rails and sleepers which we pushed along the already laid railway to the point where it was just being laid. Our working day was from eight in the morning until four in the afternoon, and we had over three miles to walk to the scene of our labours.

While we were engaged on this work we were unmolested by enemy shell fire until our last day, when he commenced to drop 5.9's on the scene of our activities. This day I was working along with several other men at the extreme end of the track, and our attention was first attracted by a number of shells bursting a couple of hundred yards in front of us. This distance, however, soon began to decrease, until they were bursting on both sides of the railway track. A Canadian R.E. Officer told us to go back a little, but the Boche shells came further and further down the track. Early in the afternoon we abandoned our work for the day as shells were now bursting the whole length of the railroad, and as we passed through the village, or, rather, the ruins of Souchez, shells were even then bursting not many yards behind us.

After being billeted in the wood outside Mt. St. Eloi for a week we moved out of it into a field about half-a-mile away, where the whole Company was found accommodation under canvas. When this move took place I was away queuing up at the Y.M.C.A. Canteen, and on my return all traces for our old encampment, with the exception of my

kit, had disappeared. The next day, April 21st, we were busy preparing our guns for the line, and that same evening we once more set out for the fray. Every time that the Company now went into the firing line about 25 per cent. of the gunners, or six to eight men of each Section, remained at the transport lines; thus in the event of the Company sustaining very heavy casualties there were always 30 or more men to fall back on. To reach our positions we had a march of about two hours which took us through the ruins of Souchez, Angres and Leivin. Passing through the village of Angres, now merely a heap of rubble, we had to wade through water a foot deep which was flowing down the road like a veritable river, caused by the water pipes being cut by shell fire.

On reaching Leivin, another shell-battered mining village, but with still an odd mine gantry towering above the ruins, the Germans commenced a sharp bombardment on some cross-roads which we were just approaching. Speaking to some Canadian artillerymen who were guiding a string of pack-mules loaded with 18-pounder shells up to their battery, I learned that this corner received considerable attention from the Boche artillery and was generally known as a nasty corner—"Wind-up Corner." A few minutes later, after the strafing had cooled down, my Section passed round this corner, and the number of dead mules laid about testified that our transport and ammunition parties had been scattered more than once by enemy shell-fire.

After passing through Leivin we proceeded down the roadway for another half-mile before we halted and unloaded our guns and ammunition from the limbers. From this point we carried our guns, &c., across a number of fields until we arrived at some old German field gun positions, which we were to use during the coming attack. Two or three German dug-outs were also at our disposal. The remainder of the night and most of the following morning we were kept busy making gun platforms and getting ready for the attack which was to commence on the morning of the 23rd April. The 13th Machine Gun Company had been brought into the line to do barrage fire and support the infantry of our own division who were taking part in the attack on Lens the following morning. Only a few hundred yards in front of us was the suburbs of the town, some of which were already in the hands of our troops. In the

afternoon and early evening we all secured as many hours sleep as we could to be in readiness for the heavy night's work of carrying boxes of ammunition from a point some 500 or 600 yards in the rear of our positions, where it was to be unloaded from our limbers and carried to the guns. As soon as it was dark a party of us made our way to the pre-arranged ration and ammunition dump about 300 yards in front of Leivin, whilst another party of men went into the ruined mining-town for water. Our rations had not yet arrived, so we sat down in a trench running alongside the road, and while we were waiting the Germans opened out a sharp fierce bombardment on the cross-roads at Leivin, enveloping the whole of the ruins at that point, and any transport or men that happened to be passing amid a fearful shower of bursting shell, which for the space of a few minutes came over from the German batteries like a veritable tornado. Shortly after this occurrence some limbers came dashing down towards us from the scene of the strafe, which turned out to be our transport with rations, &c. They were just approaching the ill-fated corner when the Boche let loose his hurricane of shell-fire, and had made a dash round the corner as soon as it ceased. While we were unloading the limbers another shower of shells whizzed over our heads and burst in the vicinity of the cross-roads. The drivers were impatient to be on the move again, and past this frequently shell-swept corner, and when at last we had got everything out of the limbers they were soon galloping down the road, and before the third doze of iron pills came sweeping over they would have got well out of the danger zone.

On the return of the men who had been for water we learned of the misfortune which had befallen to one of our number. The well from which we got our water supply was not far from the corner where the shelling had taken place, and many of the shells fell close to it, one of which killed one of our men. He had only joined us a few days ago, and this was the first time that he had been in the line.

Each Section had about two dozen of the boxes of ammunition, each containing 1,000 rounds and weighing 84lbs., which we had taken out of our limbers to take up to the gun positions. This took eight or nine of us some time to accomplish, during which the Boche sent over a number of shells which burst between our guns and the dump of ammunition, but without doing any damage, only

causing us to struggle across the dark and rough countryside a little more quickly. At midnight I went on sentry duty for two hours, being relieved at two o'clock, which gave me about four hours rest before the attack would commence.

Shortly after break of day on the morning of the 23rd April our artillery opened out with a tremendous crash, whilst with our 16 Vickers' machine guns we sent annihilating streams of bullets over the heads of our attacking infantrymen into the midst of the German troops in their support and reserve lines. For over half-an-hour the vicious crackling of our little Vickers' guns and the thunder of our artillery from the rear completely drowned all other sounds. Some eight hundred yards in front of us rose a dense cloud of smoke and dust caused by the thousands of British shells which were bursting amid the ruins of the town of Lens and its suburbs. The German artillery was not long after the opening attack before it commenced to lash out with great fury from our front line positions to a depth of five miles. We soon had a dense barrage of shells bursting 50 to 100 yards in front of our guns, but as we were well protected in our splinterproof emplacements against shrapnel bullets and pieces of shell we were comparatively safe so long as the German gunners did not lengthen their range of fire by 50 yards or so. We had been firing for over half-an-hour before the order "cease fire" was received, during which time we had expended from eight to ten thousand rounds of ammunition per gun.

The enemy was concentrated in great force in the French mining town both of infantrymen, machine gunners and heavy artillery, and very little headway was made during this attack. Between eight and nine o'clock the German artillery commenced to pommel our lines with increased vigour, and a few minutes later word came through to my Section for the guns to open rapid fire on the S.O.S. line—in front of the enemy's first line of entrenchments. Our guns maintained a heavy fire for about 15 minutes before the order "cease fire" was once more received—the Boche counter-attack having been successfully repulsed. During the rest of the morning the support of our machine gun fire was not again called upon, so that we were able to prepare our belated and simple breakfast, after which we were kept very busy in overhauling the guns, refilling belts and clearing away the large number of empty cartridge cases lying about the gun position.

An ample supply of rum had been brought into the line, but to the consternation of the entire Company this had been lost through negligence on the part of one of our Officers. Two cases, each containing two 2-gallon jars of rum which were taken out of the limbers on the night of the 21st were laid on one side of the road and left there in charge of an Officer. This Officer had only recently joined us, and the thunder of artillery fire and the crash of 5.9's bursting close at hand evidently caused him to take to a trench a short distance away, leaving the precious spirit to take care of itself instead of moving it to his place of refuge. Later when some of the men returned to carry the rum away it had vanished, which was quite natural, taking into consideration the fact that hundreds of men were coming into the line at the time, not one in a hundred of whom would have passed by two cases of rum lying on the roadside apparently belonging to no one. Thus on the morning of the attack the usual allowance of rum was not forthcoming. For many a week after this incident the Officer in question was woefully ragged for his delinquency.

Early in the afternoon following the attack the always welcome news to pack up and make tracks for the rear was received. It was a very bright day, and the German Observation Officers were taking full advantage of the opportunity to observe the doings of our forces, for immediately behind the town of Lens high up in the clear atmosphere floated some six or eight "sausage" observation balloons. My Section had about 200 yards of open country to cross to reach the communication trench down which we had to make our way into Leivin. We went across the open one at a time until the whole Section, together with our guns and gun equipment, had collected in the trench. Then commenced the torturous journey down the narrow winding trench, eventually emerging amid the ruins of Leivin bathed in perspiration. It took us over fifteen minutes to pass down this trench, whereas it was little more than five minutes walk down the road to the point where the trench brought us out at. We had just got 200 yards away from the head of the trench which was close to the cross-roads which so frequently attracted the attention of the German artillery, when a sudden whirlwind of shell-fire once more enveloped that area, raising still more of the already shell-scarred buildings completely to the ground. As each Section arrived

at the far side of Lievin all our gun tackle was placed in a heap on the side of the road, and two men of each Section remained with it until the arrival of the gun limbers, while the rest of the men continued their march to the transport lines.

On arriving at the camp we were somewhat disheartened on learning that another march of about three miles to the village of Petit Servins was to be accomplished the same evening. It was a weary band of men who late that night entered the village of Servins. Our billet was in the form of a large wooden hut capable of holding nearly 200 men. We had been exceptionally lucky this time in the line, the only casualty in the Company being the one man killed at the well on the night of the 22nd.

For the next ten days the whole of the 5th Division remained in rest billets, doing only a few short parades each day. The weather was very warm now, and in the last day of April another of our winter blankets had to be handed in. We were now left with one blanket each, and we should very soon be losing that one too. Leather jackets had already been taken from us.

## CHAPTER XVI.

HOLDING THE OPPI LINE (BATTLE OF ARRAS)—MAY, 1917.

ON the first day of May preparations were once more made for taking our turn in the firing line, and the following day we left the village of Petite Servins and marched southwards in the direction of Arras. Arriving within a mile of the historic French town we commenced to march in a direct line for the trenches. We had left the main cobbled roads and were now trudging across the open country towards the southern end of Vimy Ridge. For a billet that night we had to be contented with some badly damaged, splinter-proof, old German shelters in a sunken road amid a wilderness of desolation and destruction. We had started on this march in "battle order" dress so that we knew we should very soon be in the thick of the inferno on the far side of the ridge. The 5th Division, which had been attached to the Canadians during the month of April, was now attached to the 3rd British Army.

Throughout the night of the 2nd and 3rd May the artillery situated on all sides of our shelters kept up a steady

fire, but early on the morning of the 3rd it increased in volume until it reached that pitch which we termed drum-fire. This was to support an attack on the villages of Fresnoy and Oppy by Canadian troops and men of the 2nd Division. At dusk on the night of the 3rd May we set out towards the newly-won position to take them over from the men who had captured them during the day. It was a trying march in the dark through a steady barrage of shell fire from the German batteries. Under the shelter of a railway embankment about a mile and a half behind the front line we unloaded our limbers, and from here we carried the guns by hand to a newly dug trench about 400 yards behind the front line trench and midway between the village of Fresnoy and Oppy Wood. Our progress across the shell-swept countryside from the railway to our position had been very slow, and it was turned midnight before we had got our guns into position and all our ammunition safely stacked in the trench. A heavy shell fire was maintained on both sides during the night, but increased considerably after day-break. In the same trench as my Section was a whole Company of Canadian machine gunners, while other two Sections of my Company had their guns mounted in a trench about 200 yards in our rear, making a total of 28 guns. All these machine guns and as many more which were with the Brigade on our left, were trained to sweep the German positions between the villages of Fresnoy and Oppy, as it was known that the Boche would put all his strength against this important section of the line in an effort to regain possession.

The first day passed over without any counter-attacks taking place, which gave us an opportunity to improve our trench. Once again the "Somme idea" of cutting out nicks in the walls of the trench in which to sit and occasionally snatch a few minutes sleep had to be resorted to.

During the next four days the enemy made several strong counter-attacks, all of which were broken, however, before they reached our trenches. The honour of smashing two of these hostile attacks was given to the machine gunners; on one of these occasions all our guns had been blazing away for a couple of minutes or more before ever our artillery commenced to fire.

Each of our four teams had to take turns in holding a post two hundred yards to the right immediately behind

Oppy Wood. This particular spot seemed to receive an extra heavy share of the curtain of shell fire with which the German gunners enveiled our trenches both night and day. One morning a heavy shell burst on the parapet against this gun position, blowing in a funk-hole and burying one of the gunners who was sleeping in it at the time. When he had been dug free he had to be taken out of the line by the stretcher bearers of the 1st Royal West Kents as he was suffering from very severe shell-shock. I had two spells of 24 hours each at this post, and during the night, the second time my team was there, we had to move some distance away owing to the extra heavy shower of whiz-bangs which rained down upon us. The following morning we received orders to be on the alert, as our artillery were going to practice a creeping barrage for 15 minutes on the German positions in front of us. During this bombardment our front line trench, less than 100 yards away, would be almost deserted of infantrymen until it had ceased. Of course this brought another dose of shells clattering about our heads.

The weather had been very fine until early on the morning of the 9th, when it commenced to rain. On this morning during my turn of sentry duty from four to six o'clock, standing on an empty ammunition box to keep my feet out of the mud in the bottom of the trench, and peering over the gun into the darkness which shrouded the German trenches 500 yards away from view, I suddenly saw thousands of sharp flashes shoot out in the inky blackness behind the enemy's entrenchments, and a couple of seconds later all our trenches between Fresnoy and Oppy were being drenched by the most murderous shell fire that it was possible for the Huns to bring to bear upon them. Up went the distress signal from our front line positions, a rocket which threw out a chain of three lights—red, green, red—which was repeated in the supports and reserves until the three lights—the S.O.S. of the trenches—could be seen floating in the darkness of the early morning as far back as Vimy Ridge. On first seeing our S.O.S. signal I had called upon my mates, most of whom were sleeping more or less sound in exceedingly cramped positions on a bed of muddy earth and wearing their equipment, which had not been off their backs for six days. It was only a matter of a few seconds before all our guns had opened fire almost

before the thunder of our artillery on the ridge behind us rumbled forth in answer to the signals of distress.

For nearly an hour in the pouring rain the most fearful shell and machine gun fire continued, whilst a few hundred yards in front of our guns the German hordes were trying their utmost to pierce our line, but without success. The first onslaught having been repulsed, their artillery opened out yet a still denser and more furious bombardment than ever. Shells, from whizz-bangs to 15-inch howitzer shells, came over in thousands; the wafts of wind caused by their explosion almost pinning us to the walls of the trench. This bombardment was supported by the enemy's heavy batteries and long range guns firing from positions in the Lens district and from the right flank in a supreme effort to smash the British line at this point. In the midst of this awful shell fire my Section had as yet received no casualties. The Boche troops opposed to us were the famous Prussian Guards, and about two hours after the first infantry assault the flower of the German infantry again swarmed in overwhelming numbers towards our battered positions. In some places our trenches had been completely smashed in, especially in the vicinity of Fresnoy, where the men of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry had been buried alive by the deluge of shells which had burst on them. The fearful pounding which had been inflicted upon our line by the enemy's artillery barrage had considerably weakened it with the result that the Brigade on our left were eventually forced out of the village of Fresnoy. In the front line immediately in front of our guns was the 1st Battalion King's Own Scottish Borderers, who had also suffered heavily during this attack. They clung to their shattered trench as long as possible, but were at last forced to fall back a short distance. Before this retirement was carried out one of their Companies was cut off and most of the men either killed or taken prisoners.

The rain continued to fall all the morning making our trench bottom into a river of mud and water, while the enemy's artillery still continued to batter away at our trenches. For six or more hours my Section had been carrying on in the midst of this hellish fire, but still we had suffered no casualties. At last, however, one of the shells from a German long-range howitzer battery which was inflading our trench from the right landed right inside be-

tween my team's gun position and the one on our right, killing one man and wounding a second. We had fully expected one or more of these shells to crash in among us, as they had been falling very close all the morning. Another shell had also fallen into the trench burying itself in the wall of the parados just above a stack of ammunition, but lucky, indeed, for the gunners of my team it failed to explode—in other words, it was a "dud." Our supply of ammunition had got very low, so most of us had to make a trip to the dump about 300 yards away for a further supply. It was far from being a pleasant task struggling across the wet and muddy fields through a heavy barrage of 5.9's, but the return journey, when each of us was carrying a box containing 1,000 rounds of ammunition, was infinitely worse.

Six days in a narrow muddy little trench, no better than a roadside ditch and continually under a harrassing shell fire, was beginning to tell on most of us, and it was only after a great struggle that we at last arrived with our loads back at the gun positions. At dusk each evening a party of six men had to go down to Company Headquarters which was situated in a sunken road about a mile behind us. This locality received marked attention from the German heavy artillery, and at frequent intervals made the members of the various Headquarters residing here get well down into the extra deep shell-proof dugouts which lined the side of it. Several of the entrances to these underground dwellings were blown in by heavy shells, but the dug-outs were all connected to one another by passages, so that the destruction of an odd entrance did not prevent it from being occupied. As soon as we had picked up our rations and water, the latter being contained in 4—2-gallon petrol tins, we lost no time in commencing the return journey. Occasionally we would manage to get back to our guns with the rations during the lull in the shelling which frequently took place for about an hour at dusk. But more often it was the other way about, and the journey for our daily supplies had to be made through heavy shell fire, which resulted in one of our men being wounded.

During the heavy fighting which had taken place since we came into this section of the line we had had to get our meals whenever a chance presented itself. What meat or bacon we received was always ready cooked for us, otherwise it would have been of no earthly use to us whatever, as at times it required all the ingenuity of the soldier to even boil

a drop of water for the purpose of making himself a drink of his favourite beverage—tea. To make any smoke in the day-time would be running the risk of betraying our nest of machine guns, we therefore had to resort to cutting into thin spills any piece of dry wood which we were lucky enough to find. Dry wood was a very scarce article indeed, and we invariably had to fall back on our supply of candles, of which most of us always carried a number in our haversacks. Two small pieces of candle wrapped separately in strips of rag or bagging quickly boiled a pint of water, and also gave off practically no smoke whatever. When we had finally got our drink of tea made and ready for drinking it was many a time either spilled or filled with mud and clots of earth by bursting shells.

Other than when the enemy was launching counter-attacks the time dragged heavy on our hands, and each day we would be for hours together with nothing to do but pass the time away as best we could in sleeping, reading (if we had anything to read), discussing the merits of our guns, or writing home to say what a fine time we were having. During these hours of inactivity on our part it became a favourite practice in my Section to scribble on slips of paper arithmetic problems which were passed on to whoever cared to while away a few minutes in solving them.

Two games were also introduced to help to break the awful monotony. One of our gunners had a small pocket set of chess, and in our ditch-like position a couple of men could often be seen crouched in the shelter of a funk hole so engrossed in this scientific game that they have been quite oblivious of the fact that heavy Boche shell fire was smashing in our trenches not many yards away. Another of our men carried in his pocket a square piece of canvas which he had marked out with an ink pencil to represent a draught-board, and while we had been in the line this time he had completed the sets of pieces required. He had cut the draughts out of odd pieces of leather, putting a distinctive mark on half of them to denote the whites and blacks.

The whole of the 13th Infantry Brigade had suffered very heavy during the past week, but the Brigade on our right had even suffered heavier than ours, and was relieved on the night following the last series of German attacks, but there was no word of the 13th being relieved. Early on the morning of the 11th May my Section received orders to dismount

our guns and carry them to some dugouts on Vimy Ridge, where we were to rest for a short while. It was a distance of nearly two miles across very rough and shell-torn ground from our trench to these dugouts, and we were all but exhausted on reaching them. For 36 hours we were free from all duties, and each one of us had an extraordinary long sleep, after which we had a good wash in the water-filled shell holes. Feeling considerably refreshed and invigorated after our brief rest we again shouldered our machine guns at dusk on the night of the 12th and trudged once more towards the shell battered Oppy line.

The Germans having gained possession of the village of Fresnoy and our front line trench from that point to Oppy Wood, were evidently satisfied with their costly success, and had now ceased to attack our positions. Their artillery, however, still maintained a heavy shell fire on our supports and reserves. Our machine guns, which had up to two days ago been in positions from four hundred to seven hundred and fifty yards behind the front line trench, where they could be used to the greatest advantage against the enemy's attacking infantry, had now been pushed forward into our advanced infantry outposts and front line trench. On arriving at our old positions, which was now onwards called "Machine Gun Trench," two teams, including the one I was with, had to proceed into the front line. It was an exceptionally dark night, but after picking our way painfully slow across the intervening space for some ten minutes or more we at last arrived at the fire trench, into which we all scrambled one behind the other. Turning to the right our guide, who was by the way best known to all members of the 13th Machine Gun Company as "Q1," commenced to grope his way down the dark alley closely followed by our two teams of gunners. It was very hot and tiring struggling in the dark down this roughly dug front line trench, battered in by shell fire in many places, more so as we were carrying such heavy and awkward loads as machine guns, tripods and ammunition. We presently arrived at an old German dugout which was being used by the infantry and our Officer in charge of the guns in the front line as Headquarters.

Close by was one of the two gun positions we had to take over, but the team I was with had to proceed to the second post. Our guide informed us that it was very difficult to gain access to this post, which could only be reached

by going across the top. Climbing out of the trench we commenced our journey across the open negotiating several barbed wire entanglements which barred our progress and were the cause of more than one tear to our clothing. We were now very close to the German trench, and their brilliant Verey Lights, which they fired up into the blackness around us very frequently, soared above our heads, making us stand like statues until the glare of the light had died away. To stand perfectly still when caught in the glare of one of these lights was the safest way to escape detection. Machine gun fire was also very brisk, and two or three times the swish of bullets past our heads forced us to get as low as our loads would permit us. The post we took over was in a narrow trench on the edge of Oppy Wood, and less than fifty yards separated us from the Boche. Being such close neighbours no gun platform could be dug out on the parapet, so at night-time the gun had to be mounted just behind the trench and lifted back into the shelter of it at daybreak.

In this advanced post the time passed very slow, especially during the day-time when we had to keep quiet and not show ourselves on any account, and our trench, being so narrow and very shallow in places, prevented us from walking about. Each night as soon as it was dark enough we mounted our gun on top of the paradoss, and until the first signs of daybreak next morning one of us had to be continually on duty by the side of it. Being thus perched up on the top of the trench we had to either sit or lay down behind the gun to escape any possibility of detection, and also the bursts of machine gun fire which very frequently swept over the trench. Even when sat down we were at times forced to lay flat down to escape an extra low burst of bullets. In this position we were practically clear of shell fire, for owing to our close proximity to the Boche trench their artillery was unable to shell us except with an odd whizz-bang now and then, without endangering the lives of their own infantry in their front line positions. A party of our gunners who were in reserve brought our rations to the dugout in the main trench, from which place we had to fetch them each night. We held this post for four days before being relieved by a team of another Section. On the last day it commenced to rain very heavy, converting our trench into a mud alley, and unavoidably we soon became plastered with mud from head to foot. We got relieved about mid-

night, and then commenced one of the most muddy and slippery journeys I think I ever embarked upon. On reaching Machine Gun Trench I received the welcome news that I was one of the half-a-dozen men who had to proceed to the transport lines in the capacity of "25 per cent.," the men whose places we were taking having come into the line to rejoin their Section.

Arriving at the transport lines, which was close to the village of Rocklingcourt, some two hours after receiving orders to leave the trenches, we found accommodation in a very deep dug-out situated in the maze of trenches which a few weeks ago formed the British front line positions. Our time during the four days that we spent here was occupied chiefly in cleaning our clothing, writing letters and card playing.

In the afternoon of the 20th our little party commenced the return journey to our Sections in the trenches to allow another batch of men to have the privilege of spending a few days behind the line. The last four days that the Company was in the line I spent in Machine Gun Trench. Shell fire had slackened down considerably on both sides during the last week, but occasionally the Boche artillery opened out on our trenches with a heavy fire, and it was during one of these short bombardments that my Section lost three of the old boys, all of whom were very badly wounded. The night on which we were to be relieved came round at last; the 2nd Division took over the Fresnoy-Oppy line from us on the night of the 24th May. We reached the transport lines in the early hours of the morning of the 25th. Before laying down for a few hours sleep we all had a hot meal, followed by an issue of rum, after which it was not long before the majority of the men, laid in groups about the transport field, were fast asleep. The 13th M.G. Co. had lost a lot of men whilst the 5th Division had been holding the Oppy line. My Section had one man killed and seven wounded.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### DIVISIONAL REST, PLUS R.E. FATIGUES AND AIR RAIDS.

**B**ETWEEN 10 and 12 o'clock on the morning of the 25th May a portion of the Lens-Arras road presented a very busy scene. Somewhere about 100 motor lorries were drawn up one behind the other and were quickly being filled

with British Tommies belonging to the 13th Infantry Brigade. The whole Brigade was going to be conveyed in these motors to some rest billets a number of miles away for the short period of one week for recuperation. On the expiration of our allotted seven days' rest the billets were to be taken over by another Brigade of the 5th Division, and at the end of their seven days' rest period the third Brigade of the Division would take over the billets; thus each Brigade would enjoy the peace and quietness of a small village in the country away from practically every sign of this awful war for one whole week. Before 12 o'clock the long string of heavily loaded motors commenced to move, and we were soon speeding away down one of the famous French stone-studded and tree-lined highways.

The scene of destruction and desolation was quickly left behind, giving place to green fields and cultivated land, and whitewashed farm cottages with every sign of habitation. After a journey lasting about three hours the motors conveying the 13th Machine Gun Company came to a standstill in a village called Chamblain in which place it was quite evident we were to be billeted. Lining up by sections in the roadway we presently marched off to our respective lodgings allotted to us. No. 4 Section's billet was the usual commodious barn. During the week that we spent in this village we were favoured with exceptionally warm and fine weather. Each morning we were on parade for about three hours, after which we were free to stroll through the village and country lanes or any other way we thought best to while away our leisure hours. The seven days soon slipped by, however, and on June 1st we left Chamblain in motors for a village called Anzin-St. Aubyn, in the Arras area. The billet which we took over from another Machine Gun Company who were vacating it to proceed to our late billets at Chamblain was a large rambling chateau in which the entire Company found accommodation.

On June 3rd a batch of our men proceeded on ten days' leave to Blighty. Since March all leave had been stopped and we were all hoping, now that it had commenced again, that it would continue throughout the summer.

For the next fortnight we were engaged on alternate days on what was known as R.E. fatigues. Our Infantry Battalions were mostly engaged on road making and repairing, but we machine gunners were always employed with

a number of R.E. Sappers on the construction of a large water point near to a village called Ecurie. Some of our men would also be detailed for work in the yard of the Royal Engineers. Our working day was from eight in the morning until four in the afternoon, with a break of one hour at mid-day. We always took with us a snack, usually consisting of bread and cheese, or some fried bacon which we had saved from our breakfast. During the break for dinner we all trooped to a canteen situated about two hundred yards away from our work, where we could buy tea to wash down our dinner. On getting back to our billet in Anzin, usually about five o'clock, a hot meal always awaited us. One day I was detailed along with two other of our men to accompany an R.E. and one of their waggons on a trip to the maze of trenches in front of the village of Rocklingcourt, which two months ago had been manned by the Boche infantry. The iron stakes used by the Germans to support their barbed wire entanglements were made perfectly hollow, just the same as piping, and could therefore be used for many useful purposes. Our little party was going out to salvage a load of these stakes, which were required by the Royal Engineers for use in connection with the water point they were making.

Arriving at the old German front line trench with the remains of a deep belt of barbed wire scattered about in front of it, we each armed ourselves with a pair of wire cutters and commenced to cut through the thick and now very rusty wire from all the stakes that we saw were undamaged by shell fire. Our artillery had done its work very thoroughly in this particular spot, and it did not take us long to secure the few stakes that had survived the fury of our shell fire. We now went to the entanglements in front of the enemy's old support line, about 100 yards away, and here we were able to find all the stakes we required, the destruction having been less thorough at this point. It was about 12 o'clock when we finished our work, and after having our lunch we decided to have a roam through the old Boche trenches as it was too early for us to return to the R.E. yard with our spoil. Starting in the front line trench we inspected the machine gun posts and dug-outs until we came to an extra deep dug-out. It was terribly dark at the bottom, but after a deal of groping about and striking of matches we discovered a passage leading out of this underground

dwelling-place. Traversing very warily down this passage, which was about one yard wide, we presently came to a recess on one side of the wall, and on getting a light we found it to be a well. Continuing on our way down the tunnel we at last came to the end of it, emerging into another large dug-out. Climbing up the steps which connected this subterranean place of refuge with the entrenchments above we were somewhat nonplussed on coming into daylight again to find ourselves in another set of trenches altogether some 100 yards or more behind our starting point. At two o'clock we commenced to make our way slowly back to the village of Anzin, breaking our journey halfway for the purpose of purchasing a pint of tea at a canteen on the roadside.

The days on which we did not go out on fatigue duty with the Royal Engineers were spent in overhauling our guns and gun drill.

Just at this time the Boche Bombing Squadrons, which came over our lines every night on bombing expeditions, were doing a considerable amount of damage in the Arras district. Our transport lines dotted all over the country side were the greatest sufferers, some units losing as many as fifty to one hundred horses and mules killed by bombs in one night, and frequently the drivers also fell victims to the enemy's bombs. The bombing started almost every night as soon as it got dark and continued more or less severe until daybreak. My Section's billet was on the top storey of the chateau, and many were the dry remarks and jokes passed as to the great haul one of Jerry's bombs would make should they locate our bed chamber in which about thirty men were crowded, and with about one hundred other men in the rooms beneath us. Here is a description of a typical night in our billet during one of these frequent air-raids. On hearing the first distant droning of the enemy's bombing planes our elevated billet soon resounded with the phrase "Jerry's up." A few of the men would instantly jump up and go over to the window to scan the sky; others would commence to cry out in a mournful tone of voice "Where's your Bivvy," "Where's your Bivvy," the British soldier's translation of the heavy droning made by the engines of the enemy's planes as they rapidly drew nearer. To increase the noise and commotion now thoroughly set in one or two of our comrades would commence to imitate the noise made by

a bomb on its downward descent. A few of the men would continue to sleep in peaceful oblivion of the disturbance going on in the billet. The men clustering round the open windows eagerly scanning the starlight sky were all agog with excitement to catch a glimpse of the flotilla of enemy bombing machines, or better still, to see one of them caught in the brilliant rays of our powerful searchlights and watch it manœuvring to get out of the betraying light before the fire from our batteries of anti-aircraft guns sealed its doom. Archie fire, the name by which the shell fire from our quick-firing aircraft guns was best known, was in full swing now, and the sky overhead was alive with the sharp flashes made by the shells as they burst in dozens round about the fleet of German planes. Shell-fire, however, did not turn back the marauders, and presently violent concussions, followed by heavy explosions shook our billet to the very foundations.

In almost any direction one cared to look bombs could be seen bursting with vivid flashes in the fields round about. As the bombing cleared passed the village of Anzin and became more distant the men soon became quiet again; those at the windows, with the exception of an odd one or so returning to their forsaken blankets. A stroll during the daytime through the village and encampments close by would reveal traces of the previous nights disturbances, not only in torn up roadways and fields pitted with large craters, but freshly heaped up mounds, some of considerable size, each surmounted by a board on which was painted in large letters "Dead Horses." The large number of troops billeted behind the Vimy and Arras battle front of course did not always get off scott free, and the infantrymen out of the trenches for a rest frequently made the great sacrifice. During one heavy air attack the Canadians in Mt. St. Eloi suffered very heavy in men killed and wounded.

In spite of all the bombing and fatigue work the men who had to man the trenches always looked forward to these brief spells they occasionally were privileged to spend away from the monotonous and still more dangerous and hazardous life in the firing line. The 5th Division's rest period was quickly passing by, and all too soon came the day when we had to bid good-bye to our billets and return to the old life in the trenches again.

We also had to say good-bye at this same time to the one remaining blanket, the only item of bed covering we

possessed; henceforth throughout the summer months we would have to be content to sleep in our khaki with a great coat as our only blanket whenever we came out of the line for a brief rest.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### ANOTHER SPELL OF DUTY IN THE TRENCHES AT OPPY.—

JUNE, 1917.

**S**HORTLY before dusk on the night of the 13th June the various units composing the 13th Infantry Brigade were making their way slowly towards the crest of Vimy Ridge on their second visit to the trenches in front of Oppy Wood and Fresnoy. No transport or bodies of troops were allowed to proceed over the ridge until it was quite dark, and when the 13th Machine Gun Company with its string of gun limbers arrived just below the crest of the famous ridge a large mass of ration waggons, limbers and Battalions of Infantry were patiently waiting for darkness, under the cover of which we would all resume our trek down the eastern slope. After proceeding over the ridge on to the more level fields below for some distance we at last came to a halt close to our Headquarters, which was in the sunken road, where it had been during our last spell of three weeks in this section of the line. Unloading our guns and ammunition from the limbers, which had now to be carried to our respective positions in the front line trenches more than a mile away, we resumed our journey down the sunken road. During the three weeks that we had been out of the line the trenches had been greatly improved, and our progress down Machine Gun Trench and the connecting communication trenches to the support and front line trenches was unimpeded.

On arriving at the fire trench our guide climbed out of the trench and commenced to lead the team. I was with across a field, and by way of encouragement informed us that we were almost at the end of our journey. It was about half-an-hour since we had shouldered our loads in the sunken road, and the gun which I was carrying now seemed to be increasing in weight with every step I took. Presently a challenge rang out in the still night, "Who goes there," which was answered by our guide with the words "Machine

Gunners." At first we could not see our challenger, but on approaching nearer we could see the outline of a trench, on the top of which were clustered some half-dozen men representing the team of gunners we had come to relieve. We found the trench in which we had to stay for the next few days to be a very poor one indeed, the deepest portion being less than four feet. From the men we were relieving we learned sufficient to come to the conclusion that this post was situated in one of the ill-fated trenches in which about half a company of infantrymen had been buried by the awful German shell fire which swept over the Oppy and Fresnoy sectors on May 9th. Being night time we could not see exactly what our post was like, but in the dim light of the night it did not look at all prepossessing. With the advent of daybreak we could see the unmistakable signs of the catastrophe that had befallen the band of Tommies who had manned this trench on that never-to-be-forgotten morning five weeks ago. In every yard of this battered ditch were rifles and bayonets poking just a few inches out of the earth, whilst here and there could be seen patches of khaki and limbs protruding, clearly indicating, alas, that the murderous barrage of shell fire from the German guns had accomplished its grim work only too thorough.

In daylight we could see that the shelter at our disposal consisted of two stretchers laid across the trench a few yards away from the gun platform. To give us more room in this crude dwelling-place the parapet had been cut away so as to form a broad seat on which three men could sit, and in which position we had to take our occasional forty winks. This post was completely isolated from all other posts and entrenchments, and no one could get to us except at night time, and even then if the night was very dark they stood a very poor chance of discovering our abode. The tall grass which was growing in the field had covered from view all that was left of this trench with the exception of a few yards in the vicinity of our position.

Our rations were brought to us at night time, but the first night the men could not find the position, and we would not have got our supplies had it not been that myself and another member of the team were on sentry just as it began to get light. My mate called my attention to what he thought to be two men walking about the field behind us, and as the light got stronger we could make out that they

were both carrying something and were looking carefully round about them. We at once came to the conclusion that they were the men with our rations and commenced to shout after them. When we had made them hear they still could not locate us, and at last my mate had to go out and meet them. They were the men with our rations, sure enough, and had been out all the night trying to find us.

For the first day of our stay here the weather was very dry and warm, but on the morning of the second day it commenced to rain, and continued to do so until we were relieved three nights later. Puddle and mud was soon rife in the trench bottom and in our shelter, the latter being far from water-tight. Much to our relief we were not molested by much shell fire, and only on one occasion did the Boche send any in our locality, and they took the form of a salvo of whizz-bangs, which clattered with such a vicious suddenness all round us that the three or four of us who were enjoying a few minutes sleep woke up in alarm.

Being wet through and caked with mud, and cut off entirely from all our comrades, we began to long for the the night, when another team of gunners would come to our relief. There was not a vestige of wood to be found with which to kindle a fire, and once again our ever-ready supply of candles came in useful with which to heat the water for making our drinks of tea.

On the night of June 17th we were relieved by a team from another Company. The post being finally handed over, we lost no time in making tracks for our transport lines, now situated in a field in front of the village of Rockling-court. It was in the early hours of the morning of the 18th June that my Section arrived at the camp, which consisted of three tents, a little way from the Company's horse lines. Once again we have got back to the old trench routine of so many days in the trenches and so many out. No. 4 Section having just been relieved would return again for a spell of twelve days in another four days time.

Each man always looked with anticipation for the arrival of the Blighty mails, and those to whom none of the letters and bulky parcels were addressed to always shared in the delight of their more fortunate comrades. On the first day after coming out of the line I was one of the lucky men to receive a parcel from Blighty. Parcels from England did not always arrive intact, and it was not by any means a

rare occurrence for a parcel to reach its destination with the contents crushed to a pulp, much to the disappointment of the recipient. My parents, however, had taken no risks, and it took me some little time first to cut open the calico which encased a heavy and remarkably strong wooden box, and then to prize open the securely fastened lid before I could reveal to my circle of chums the contents of the hamper. What a surprise it was to all of us when on removing the layers of paper underneath the lid we beheld a fairly large cake, and what was still more astonishing, also beautifully iced. The twenty-first anniversary of my birthday was on the 21st June, hence the arrival of this box containing so rare a delicacy as an iced birthday cake in the bleak and desolate regions of the Western Front.

The evening of the 21st June found my Section again taking over positions in the Oppy Wood sector. On this occasion two teams, including the one I was with, had to man two rather unique posts. Both were within fifty yards of one another and were situated midway between the support line and a reserve trench on the slope of a rise in the ground where good observation of the German lines could be secured. These machine gun positions consisted of a short trench about five feet long, the gun platform occupying the centre of the parapet, whilst three feet of the parapet was cut away to within one foot of the trench bottom and extended back some four feet, the whole of which was covered in with sheets of corrugated iron to make a shelter. Two men always remained in these positions in charge of the guns and were relieved every 48 hours, the relief of course taking place at night time.

During the day time these positions were entirely camouflaged from the enemy's view by means of large squares of wire netting interwoven with imitation grass, which were spread over them each morning at the first signs of daybreak. Once this curtain, as it were, was in position the two men on duty were completely caged in, and could not show themselves or attempt to leave it until dusk, when the camouflage was removed. The remainder of the gunners not on duty stayed in a large covered-in pit about 250 yards away.

On the 25th June the Boche opened out with his artillery a heavy bombardment on our lines, which resulted in many of our men being killed or wounded. Among those

who were killed was George Haigh, one of our gunners, who had been my constant friend and companion ever since he first came to the Company over nine months ago.

On the night of the 26th June my Section commenced to construct a series of new gun pits behind the old machine gun trench in readiness for an attack which was to take place on the 28th. The 13th Infantry Brigade was relieved on the night of the 27th by the Brigade which was to carry out the attack. All our gun teams in the front line and supports were also relieved, but the whole Company had to remain in the line as our guns were to be engaged on barrage fire. The attack was timed for six o'clock in the evening, and shortly before that time we all collected at our respective guns and made our final preparations. No less than forty-eight Vickers' machine guns were being used to support the coming infantry assault, nearly all of which would be engaged on barrage fire and trained on the one objective—Oppy Wood. Dead on the hour the fearful racket of our artillery once again thundered in our ears—the attack was in full swing. Our guns, also, immediately began to fire at full pressure, and as each belt was emptied of its deadly contents it was taken to a near-by shell hole, where a party of men were refilling the empty belts with great rapidity.

Just before the attack commenced the air had become very heavy and oppressive, whilst black lowering clouds overhead clearly indicated the coming of a thunderstorm. The attack had barely been in progress five minutes when a vivid flash of lightning shot out of the storm-gathering clouds and a second later the thunderstorm, of extraordinary fury, joined in to swell the noise and tumult caused by artillery fire and the crash of bursting enemy shells. With the storm came a deluge of rain which soaked us to the skin, and converted the pits and shell holes in which we were working into wells of mud and water. The German artillery was now furiously bombarding our lines, and luckily for us one line of his shell fire which was stamping and tearing at the ground in front of our guns maintained its distance, the nearest shell to burst in our proximity being 25 yards away. Our Divisional Company, which had its four batteries ranged on our left, were not so lucky. One of their guns about 100 yards away was put out of action by a 5.9 shell which burst in the position, killing three of the gunners and wounding the remainder.

This action, which was in conjunction with one by the Canadians at Lens, was a complete success, and was witnessed by hundreds of men out at rest and those fortunate men whose duty took them very little nearer the firing line than the Transport Camps from the crest of Vimy Ridge where they secured a magnificent panorama view of the attack both at Lens and Oppy Wood. My Company only had one man wounded during this stunt.

During the past two months our air-craft had been very active, as also had the Boche, but more so during the past three or four weeks. The Germans were now flying a small plane, the body of which was painted red which, coupled with the fact that it downed every British aeroplane with which it came in close contact, originated in it being christened the "Red-Devil." Day after day we watched the manœuvrings of this super-fighting plane; one of its favourite tactics seemed to be to approach very high above a squadron of our scouting or observation planes and then sweep down with surprising suddenness on the one it had selected for its victim. It was very rare that the German airman failed to either kill the English pilot or force him to come to earth. As the days went by, on each of which one or more of our airmen would fail to report back at their aerodrome, they became very wary and only approached the German lines infrequently and in large squadrons. The German airmen took every advantage of flying at low altitudes over our trenches, not only for observation but to sweep them with machine gun fire. When the air above us was alive with Boche planes, and the only British machines that could be seen were a few sailing majestically in the air some two or more miles away to the rear of our trenches; it was only natural on such occasions that our men should criticize the statements of our Blighty newspapers such as "Our airmen complete masters of the air."

On the other hand, however, our own airmen performed some fine feats during this period. One exceptionally quiet afternoon three of our airmen caused a deal of excitement by flying their machines at a furious speed over our trenches, across No Man's Land, and away over the German lines at a height of not more than four or five yards above the ground. A number of German observation balloons were floating high in the air three or more miles behind their trenches, and we

at once concluded that the airmen were making a bold bid in an effort to bag one of the suspended "sausages." The reason they flew so low was to escape the fire from the Boche anti-aircraft guns. We all carefully followed the movements of the three aeroplanes, and when they had proceeded a considerable distance over the German lines, they began to climb higher and higher until they practically passed out of sight. A few seconds later the result of this daring enterprise was known to all the excited watchers in our trenches. One of the Boche Balloons suddenly burst into flames, crumpled up, and what remained of it quickly fell plumb down to the ground, leaving a pillar of thick black smoke behind it. We had not many minutes to wait before the three brilliant airmen came scorching back at the same low altitude as before. As they passed over our trenches they were heartily cheered by the occupants, which all three acknowledged by a wave of the hand.

Almost every evening, about one hour before dusk, we were greatly interested by the performance of one of our airmen. This airman always took for his objective the Boche trenches in and about Oppy Wood, and flew so leisurely without apparently being in the least concerned about the circle of shells bursting all around him. As he approached the German entrenchments the rat-a-tat-tat of dozens of machine guns would break forth, and in response to this fresh outburst our man would swoop along the Boche trench and sweep it with machine gun fire. This would conclude his first item on the evening's programme, after which he would retire some distance behind our lines, where for some minutes he would entertain all the troops in the trenches and on Vimy Ridge with a few sensational air stunts. He did not leave the Germans unmolested for many minutes together, however, and would continue to pepper their trenches with machine gun bullets at very frequent intervals until it got dark.

On the evening of July 1st the whole of the 13th Machine Gun Company went out of the line to join the rest of our Brigade who were out at rest.

During this period of trench duty the Company had again lost a large number of men, including three killed. One was my friend; the second was one of the old boys of No. 2 Section who was killed by one of our own shells which dropped short, landing dead in our trench instead of in the

enemy's. The third man was No. 1 Section's runner, and also a "1914 contemptible." This man met his fate one very dark night, when, in Company with two of our officers and a sergeant they missed their way when crossing over to the advanced post in front of Oppy Wood (before the advance on June 28th) and dropped into the German front line trench in mistake for the advanced outpost. They found out their error too late to avoid a shower of bombs, a splinter from which badly wounded the runner. His companions carried him as far as the German barbed wire entanglements through a shower of bullets and hand grenades, but here they were forced to leave him to the mercy of the Huns. When the surviving members reached our own trenches a strong patrol of infantrymen was sent out to bring the wounded man in. No trace of him could be found, however, but some time after the occurrence we were officially informed that he died of his wounds shortly after being taken a prisoner.

## CHAPTER XIX.

IN WHICH I PROCEED ON TEN DAYS' LEAVE TO BLIGHTY, .  
JULY, 1917.

ON the 7th July the 13th Infantry Brigade again went into the line, but this time we were to have a change of trenches. Instead of occupying the Oppy Sector the Brigade took over the trenches in the Fresnoy Sector. I was once more on the roll of the "25 per cent." party, and did not proceed up the line with my Section. The next morning the few of us who were left in the camp had to leave it and migrate to a field behind the shell-shattered sugar refinery at Rocklingcourt, where we had to put up a couple of bivouacs for our accommodation.

The whole countryside immediately behind the Vimy-Arras front to a depth of several miles was one maze of military camps and horse lines. This area was absolutely destitute of civilian population, with the exception of a few who still clung to their homes amidst the ruins of the City of Arras. Most of our troops were under canvas or living in roughly constructed shelters made with sheets of corrugated iron. A few more fortunate units were billeted in the sand-bagged cellars of ruined Arras, and in the outlying villages that had escaped destruction by enemy shell fire. The

Boche artillerymen occasionally sent over into our camps one or more long range shells, but their attention was chiefly lavished on the ill-fated Cathedral. Two or three times a week the Germans would hurl three or even four of his monster "coal boxes," which were larger than our own 15in. shell, at the historic Church, now reduced to a mere heap of masonry.

Arras was about three miles behind our camp, and as these huge shells sailed over our heads the noise they made was almost equal to that of a Blighty express. A few seconds later a large cloud of dark smoke would be seen to envelop the shattered tower of the Cathedral, the echo of the explosion reaching our ears immediately afterwards.

In the afternoon of the 13th July I left the camp to re-join my Section in the line, and on the way I met two of my mates from the Section returning from the trenches *en route* for Blighty on ten days' leave. Leave was proceeding at quite a brisk rate just now, and the 13th Machine Gun Company was sending four and occasionally six men every week. Two exceptionally long and winding communication trenches running from the top of Vimy Ridge down to the entrenchment before Oppy and Fresnoy which had been in the course of construction by our disengaged Cavalry for some weeks past, were now completed. These two trenches, one of which took you into the Fresnoy Sector, and the second into the Oppy Sector, were called "Tired Alley," and "Tommy's Alley" respectively. My Section being in the Fresnoy Sector, I had to make my way down "Tired Alley," a trench which could not have been more fitly named.

While proceeding down this Alley a magnificent view of the country stretching below and also of the smoking ruins of the town of Lens to the left was always before your eyes until the level country was reached. Commencing from a reserve trench on the Ridge which was known as the "Brown Line," this "Tired Alley" ran into another reserve trench called the "Red Line," and close to the village of Willerval. Company Headquarters were in the "Red Line," and here I met my section as they were returning from the front line for six days rest which were to be spent in some dugouts in Willerval. This village was far from being an ideal resting camp with its ruined cottages and farms bristling with our artillery, the fire from which naturally drew counter-fire from the Boche artillery. At certain hours each

day and night we were imprisoned in our dug-outs, which were of strong German construction, by heavy barrages of enemy shell fire which regularly crashed down upon the village.

Several nights we were called out to work with the R.E.'s, a number of whom were nightly engaged making a dug-out for one of our positions on "Britannia Bank." This gun position was in a trench on the top of a very high bank in front of the ruins of what had once been the village of Arleux. On the occasion of our first fatigue we were engaged in carrying up timber supports from an R.E. Dump situated in a sunken road a few hundred yards from our place of rest. On succeeding nights, we were engaged in tipping the earth as it was excavated and put into sand-bags by the R.E's., into the numerous shell-holes which were dotted about in great profusion both in front and behind the trench.

The Sappers always left their work by 4 o'clock each morning and proceeded back to their shelters in the "Brown Line," and we also retired to our abode of rest in the dug-outs at Willerval.

On the night of the 19th July my Section took over four positions in the vicinity of Arleux, two of which were situated in a trench known as "Arleux loop," and which skirted the shattered village of the same name.

Six o'clock on the morning of the 20th a raid into the enemy's trenches was made by a party of men belonging to the 1st Batt. East Surrey Regiment; and while the raid was in progress our guns were engaged in sweeping the German reserves. This raid was not a success; the raiders lost a large number of men in killed and wounded and only secured one prisoner. The captured German was brought down past our gun position to the Headquarters of the Royal West Kents a little lower down the trench. He was left in the trench amid a circle of interested Tommies for some considerable time, which gave them ample opportunity to bombard the captive with showers of questions, most of which he was able to answer in broken English. He said he belonged to a Company of Engineers and had been in the German Army for three years. The idea of being a prisoner in the hands of the English did not appear to trouble him in the least; in fact, he told us that he was only too pleased to get away from the German Army. At the time of his capture he had been working in the Boche front line trench.

That same afternoon two of our teams had to proceed into Britannia trench, our support line, which was about seventy-five yards behind the front line trench. My team took over the position on Britannia bank, and the second team took over a position at the foot of the bank. In front of us stretched Fresnoy Park, whilst a few yards behind us was Fresnoy Wood, and in a hollow two hundred and fifty yards further back was the village of Arleux. Our front line trench in this sector was named "Brandy Trench," and the two communication trenches connecting "Britannia" and "Brandy" trenches were called "Beer Trench" and "Tea Trench." Britannia trench was a very poor one, and was so narrow in several places that only a very slim man could pass. We were continuously harassed by shell fire and trench mortars, and among the latter were included numerous "Minnies." It was while we were being strafed by trench mortars that a Lewis gunner of the Royal West Kents, and who had just been warned to be ready to leave the trenches on the next day to proceed to Blighty on leave, was killed. Each night a party of men from each Section had to go down to Company Headquarters, close to the village of Willerval for rations—this was as far as they were brought by our transport, and a good two miles from our positions. During the first few hours of darkness the artillery on both sides were always very active on the off chance of catching the ration parties.

On the night of the 22nd July I went with the ration party, and when we called at our Section Officer's dug-out on the return journey I was told to report to him at once. Making my way down into his sanctum I was politely asked for my home address in Blighty. This, as I well knew, was the first procedure before a soldier proceeded on leave to England, and having given the necessary information he smilingly said that I was to embark for the U.K. on the 25th instant.

Corporal Speed, who was in charge of the team I was with, was also to go on leave the same day. What a shower of ejaculations greeted my re-appearance in the trench! As myself and the man from the other team in Britannia trench parted from the rest of the ration carriers such phrases as "Keep your head well down Toby," "Mind he doesn't spot you," and "Keep well down that sap-head," were shouted after us, presumably with a view for my safety during the

next twenty-four hours. Just as we entered our home trench the Boche opened out a fierce bombardment; one would almost have thought that they had heard of my good news and were greatly resented by it. We had a good two hundred yards of the trench to traverse before reaching our respective gun positions, and which was being heavily strafed with gas shells. These shells, which made a peculiar whine as they speeded through the air to their destined objective, were bursting with a very soft explosion peculiar to gas shells, on all sides of the trench, polluting the air with their poisonous contents and causing us to sneeze a great deal. The vicinity of our posts was being still more heavily shelled both with trench mortars and 5.9's. All the gunners of both teams, with the exception of two men on sentry with each of the two guns, were taking shelter on the steps of the dug-out which was in course of being sapped close to our position on the bank. I at once acquainted Corporal Speed of the good news, and that he had to report to the Officer as soon as possible.

Speed having come out to France in 1914, had already been on leave to England twice. It was not until the small hours of the morning that the shelling of our trench abated sufficient to allow of him to proceed on his way to Arleux Loup. This bombardment on the night of the 22nd and 23rd July, like most bombardments where the shells used were of a large calibre and high velocity, took its toll in killed and wounded. Fifty yards on the left of our two gun positions was a Lewis gun post, and during the night's strafe two 5.9's landed right in the trench at that point, killing three and wounding the rest of the men at the post.

Early in the evening Speed and myself bade our mates good-bye and commenced our tramp to the transport lines. The next day was spent chiefly in cleaning our apparel of all the traces of trench life, after a quest for new clothing having been made without avail. My Company's Stores possessed not a single item of new clothing, and on making an application to one of our Infantry Battalions we learned that they were also in the same plight. At eight o'clock that night Speed and myself, together with our Quarter-Master-Sergeant and three of the transport drivers, went to take our seats in a motor 'bus which was standing in the main road running past the field in which we had our transport lines. This 'bus was to take us to the railhead at Aubigny, which

was twelve miles further back, and shortly after eight o'clock we had commenced our homeward journey. We had travelled about half the distance between the camp and Aubigny when our conveyance came to a standstill opposite a number of huts built on the roadside. Before leaving our Company none of us had received either our passes or leave money, and this halt had been made so that we could procure these necessities from the "Dispursing Officer," who had his offices in one of these huts. We had a long wait before it came to our turn to go into the office, and it was very late in the night by the time we were all once more seated in the motor 'bus and proceeding in the direction of the railhead.

Arriving at the station we at once boarded a train which was waiting for its consignment of homeward-bound Tommies, and which, by the way, was not composed of cattle trucks but 3rd class French passenger coaches. Shortly before midnight the train steamed out of the station, and very soon we were travelling at a somewhat more rapid rate than is usual with troop trains in France. I fell asleep soon after the train journey commenced, and woke up about seven-thirty next morning to find that we were practically at our destination, for a few minutes later the train pulled into Boulogne station. Many of the men did not even wait for the train to come to a standstill before they commenced to fling their equipment and packs out on to the platform and themselves jumping from the carriages. When we were all out of the train we lined up on the platform and marched away to a large hall in the centre of Boulogne, which was being used to accommodate soldiers bound for Blighty during the two or three hours that they had to spend in the French port before they could be embarked. Here we were able to procure a good breakfast, for which we had to pay of course, and also a good wash. During the three hours that we stayed in this building several long lists of instructions and warnings relating to soldiers proceeding on leave were read out to us. Great stress was put on the Sections relating to the souvenirs men were not allowed to take home and the taking of live ammunition; any man found with any of the forbidden articles on his person was liable to be sent back to his unit and his leave cancelled. A number of instructions were also read out relating to our returning back to "dear old France," but at this stage the lecturer's words were almost drowned by a chorus of ejacula-

tions from the crowd of soldiers who were now becoming impatient for the boat time to arrive. The Officer who was reading out the instructions soon began to shout and storm, but only to be greeted with further cries of "Pack up," "Put a sock in it," &c.

At eleven o'clock the whole lot of us, there would be at least 1,000 men, were marshalled outside in several batches ready to proceed to the leave boat. What a parade it was, men belonging to all branches of the British Army and from all parts of the line from Ypres to the Somme were represented. Jostling along side by side were men of the Cavalry, and Artillery, A.S.C., R.A.M.C., A.O.C., Labour Corps, the Air Force and Infantry of the line. Many were the bags and packages carried by men from the bases and those on the staffs of the various Headquarters behind the line, most of whom were clad in brand new clothing. Most conspicuous of all, however, were the infantrymen, many of whom still bore traces of the trenches and wore khaki that had seen many weeks of rough wear and tear. These men carried all their possessions in that neatly packed valise strapped on the back, with their rifles slung on one shoulder. It was fifteen minutes' walk from the hall to the dock-side, and as we passed through the dock gates each man received a large tea-cake. A little way on the dock-side were a number of men wearing a white armlet with the word "Embarkation," who examined our passes as we filed through. As we approached the gangway leading on to the boat we were all given a card on which we had to write our name, Regimental number and unit to which we belonged. Once on board each man had to take a life belt, very few of which, however, were put on by the men until an official of the boat came round and made every jack-man put them on.

By mid-day we were well on our way, and, favoured with calm weather which we all appreciated, the shores of old England loomed into view by one-thirty, and before two o'clock the vessel was securely moored to the landing stage at Folkestone. This crossing had been far more enjoyable than the mid-night crossing I made from Southampton to Le Havre just fifteen months ago. From the boat we went straight to the train which was to take us to Victoria, and I fully expected to be in the Metropolis by 4.30, but the train remained stationary in Folkestone Station until three

o'clock. On arriving at Victoria Station every Tommy made a rush for one or other of the numerous box offices dotted about the platform where French money was being exchanged. Having got my one hundred francs converted into English money I went over to the buffet where men coming home on leave from France were supplied with all the food they required. On the station were a large number of elderly men wearing the uniform of the City Volunteers who were directing all soldiers who were strangers to the City to the various Y.M.C.A. Huts, Pay Offices, Tube Stations, and giving information relating to the departure of trains to any part of the country. With a view to getting some of my credits which were due to me I accompanied one of the men from my Company to a Pay Office a few minutes walk from Victoria, but the large crowd of men I saw waiting outside made me return to the station and make tracks for King's Cross. I arrived there just in time to dispatch a telegram and catch the 8.30 express for York, and I arrived in that City in the small hours of the morning of the 26th July.

Six o'clock on the morning of the 4th August, 1917, I found myself once more in the City of London; my ten days' leave had come and gone as if it had only been a dream. Making my way via the tubes to Victoria Station, I caught a train which left at eight o'clock for Folkestone. There was a marked difference in the speed and expeditious manner in which we were sent back to France compared with the homeward journey. Arriving at Folkestone a boat was there waiting to carry us across the Channel, and as soon as the last man was on board the gangways were pulled away and the ship commenced its journey. By 11.30 I was once more on French soil. War Office Officials have a great love of having Military Camps built in the most out-of-the-way and difficult of access places it is possible to locate. St. Martin's Camp, on the outskirts of Boulogne, was far from being an exception, and many a thousand of British soldiers have cursed and swore as they toiled up the long steep slope of St. Martin's Hill, which lead to the camp under the weight of their packs and equipment and numerous parcels they had brought from home, and with perspiration rolling down their cheeks. Almost dead-beat we at last arrived in the the Camp only, however to be marshalled into one large mass on one side of the square, while an officer gifted with exceptionally powerful lungs mounted on to a platform and

commenced to bellow forth the order, according to the Division or Headquarters, or other formation to which we belonged, in which we should depart. We were divided up into groups, each to travel to their destination by a different train, and, as each train load was completed the men were taken to one of the large huts, where they had to stay until the train time. At breakfast-time the the folowing morning we were given one day's rations, and our water bottles filled with tea if we desired it, and at 9.30 we marched to the station, boarded a waiting train, consisting this time of cattle trucks, and were soon rumbling along towards the line. A record run of between seven and eight hours brought us into the station of Mt. St. Eloi and here myself and a large number of men belonging to the 5th Division had to alight. Outside the station a motor 'bus was waiting to convey us to Roeling-court and by 7 o'clock I was once more among my trench companions.

## CHAPTER XX.

### THE DIVISION MOVES FROM ARRAS TO THE YPRES SALIENT.

**O**N rejoining my Company on the night of the 15th August I found my Section was out of the trenches for six days rest, and my unpleasant thoughts of having to proceed direct into the line immediately on my return were banished forthwith.

Within five minutes walk of our Camp no less than four large concert halls had now been erected, and every night Concert Parties, belonging to the various Divisions stationed on the Arras front gave first-rate concerts, to which all troops were admitted for the sum of half a franc. These concerts were greatly appreciated by our soldiers, especially after a long dreary spell of duty in the trenches. Most of our men paid occasional visits to the City of Arras either to see the shell-ruined Cathedral or to do a little shopping in the shops that were still carrying on their businesses as in the days of peace. I made one or two excursions to the ruins of the Cathedral, and on each visit I saw a large number of British soldiers all busy writing their names and home addresses on to slabs of stone or marble and also on the walls. On the occasion of my last trip, which I made with one of my comrades of long standing, we had just got nicely outside the city when the Germans sent a couple of heavy shells in the direction of the Cathedral.

In the evening of the 10th August I accompanied my Section once more into the trenches at Fresnoy for a spell of eighteen days. The first six days I spent at a position about seventy-five yards to the right of the one I left to proceed on my ten days leave. German trench mortars were very troublesome, especially their huge minenwerfers, one of which landed right in the trench midway between my team's post and the one on the bank, destroying about ten yards of it. On the night of our sixth day in the line another Section took over these positions in Britannia trench, my Section taking over two others in Arleux Loup and two in an old German trench behind the support line. Immediately after we had been relieved and got into our new posts Jerry commenced to drop trench mortars on Britannia trench, one of which burst near the position my gun team had just left killing an infantryman of the Royal West Kents who was attached to our Company for the time we were in the trenches. During my recent absence numerous casualties had occurred amongst our gunners, and a number of men had had to be borrowed from the Infantry Battalions to make up our strength.

While my Section was in reserve a new method of sending gas over into the enemy's lines was used. The poisonous gas was contained in large cylinders which were fired over to the German trenches from our heavy trench mortar guns, a battery of which were in position in a sunken road close to my Section's guns. To assist in the work of destruction and in conjunction with the gas attack our artillery drenched the German positions with a heavy curtain of shell fire. The Boche artillery was some time before it opened out in retaliation, but when it did the dust and earth began to fly. Our two positions in the old German trench, at one of which I was on duty, both narrowly escaped destruction and most of our ammunition was buried. This attack took place one night, and during the following day our airmen were busy flying over the affected enemy's lines, and from this important branch of the British Army we learned that the enemy had suffered very heavily as the result of our gas attack of the previous night and were engaged all day in clearing their trenches of the dead, gassed and wounded.

The 23rd day of August found No. 4 Section once more installed in the Britannia trench. My team had taken over a position one hundred and fifty yards below Britannia bank,

and during the day time our gun had to be mounted in a pit behind the trench, which had been specially dug, leaving a table as it were in the centre on which we fixed the gun for the purpose of firing at hostile aircraft. In the course of a day we fired hundreds of rounds of ammunition at venture—some enemy aeroplanes, making us plenty of work to do what with filling belts, carrying the empty cartridge cases down to Company Headquarters and bringing back fresh supplies of ammunition. Night-time also found us as busy as bees cutting out a new trench leading from the one we were occupying and extending twenty or more yards in front, at the terminus of which we were to make another gun position. The number of leisure hours, either during the day or night time, after we had performed our periods of sentry duty which came round every fourth or fifth hour and frequently at shorter intervals, coupled with the number of hours we had to put in at trench digging and every day trench fatigues, were few and far between.

The whole of the 5th Division was relieved from this part of the front on the night of the 28th August, and the day after the 13th Machine Gun Company came out of the line we marched to a secluded country village a number of miles behind the battle front. Our stay in this peaceful hamlet was very short, but quite long enough for us to greatly decrease the quantity of delicious apples which grew in great profusion in an orchard adjoining the large house in which the Company was billeted.

On the 4th September we moved away to a village called Ivergny, which was reached late in the afternoon after a very trying march of five or six hours along country by-roads and lanes. For the next two weeks we stayed in this village recuperating from the effects of trench life and preparing for our next trip into the firing line. Each morning, with the exception of Sunday, we were on parade refreshing our knowledge of the intricate working, mechanism and uses of the machine gun, and in infantry drill, rifle and revolver shooting. My Section was billeted in an outhouse in a farmyard, and the house which was also an "Estaminete" was the nightly rendezvous of No. 4 Section. Immediately behind our billet was the orchard used by my Section as a parade ground, and the source from which we procured our daily supply of fruit. During our stay here one of my steadfast comrades had the misfortune to hurt his knee one

night after having drunk rather freely of intoxicating liquors. He was admitted into hospital next day and was away from the Company several months. It was also during our fortnight's rest in this village that No. 4 Section's billet was the scene of a serious disturbance one night which barely escaped without disastrous results. One of our Sergeants was a coloured man, and not at all a favourite among the men. On this particular night when he returned to the billet as usual a number of the Section who had drunk more French wine than what was good for them passed some uncomplimentary remarks about him, resulting in the Sergeant going up to one of the men and striking him in the face. Then ensued a fierce wrangle of hard words and threats, brought to a climax by one of the men persisting in drawing his revolver, which, in the heat of the moment he would have loaded had he not been restrained by several of his comrades. At this juncture the billet was entered by the Company-Sergeant-Major and another Sergeant, who succeeded in calming the infuriated men and took the N.C.O. who had been the centre of the commotion out of the way. Nothing further was ever heard of this affair—it died out as quickly as it arose.

In the afternoon of the 19th September we left this village and travelling northwards until midnight we detrained at a small town, where we were to stay for the next forty-eight hours. My Section had difficulty in finding our billet, and after tramping the streets for half-an-hour our Officer had to hunt up the Billeting Officer, as the people in the houses we had already knocked up refused to admit us. At one house the only response we received was a volume of rapidly spoken French hurled at us from a bedroom window, but whether the man was politely informing us that we had come to the wrong house, or was cursing us for having roused him from his slumbers, none of us could say. While our Officer was making inquiries we all dumped our packs and equipment in the roadway and patiently sat on them until his return. We eventually got to our right billet, which took the form of a neat and tidy brick-built loft in the yard of a small private house.

Mid-day on the 21st we again entrained, and before the journey was completed we could see our observation balloons floating high up in the air in one long line behind that famous and immortal sector of the British battle front known

as "Ypres," or "Wipers" as it was frequently termed by the English soldiers. The incessant booming of our heavy guns could now be distinctly heard, increasing in volume as we rapidly approached nearer to the line. Presently our train steamed into the station of Vlamertinghe, a village situated two miles behind the city of Ypres. We had no work to do in connection with the unloading of our transport, something very unusual for the gunners of the 13th Machine Gun Company, so that within a few minutes of arriving at this railhead we were marching out of the busy station yard, through the shattered village of Vlamertinghe, in the direction of Popperinghe. About half-way to the last-named place we halted outside a number of huts which were to be our homes for this night at any rate. It was dusk by the time our Transport Section arrived from the station. It appeared that shortly before they were ready to come away a number of long range Boche shells fell in the vicinity of the station yard, but happily without inflicting any casualties. Later in the night, shortly after we had all settled down for a night's steep between our blankets, a luxury which had once more come our way, the ominous humming of enemy bombing machines reached our ears. Our huts instantly resounded with cries of "Jerry's up." One of the German raiders we could tell was quickly approaching our district, and before many more seconds had elapsed it was hovering immediately above our wooden huts, then all of a sudden its engine appeared to have been shut off, for the noise of it had suddenly ceased. We were all straining our ears as we lay or sat motionless in the hut waiting for something which we all knew was about to happen, when a whizzing noise, rapidly increasing, as a heavy infernal weapon of modern warfare came hurtling down from above, reached our ears. Before any of us had time to speak a heavy thud, which seemed to rock the very earth, came from somewhere outside, then followed a tremendous explosion, the flash of which lit up the darkness with a brilliant glare, while the force of the explosion shook our abode to such an extent that the rafters in the roof rattled like so much timber being thrown off a cart, and some even came falling on top of us. Other bombs followed in quick succession, but each one fell further and further away. Having recovered from the startling disturbance a chorus of "Where did that one go to, Herbert," was at once struck up. We were not disturbed

any more that night, and early next morning we soon learned what damage the bomb had done. It had dropped outside the doorway of the end hut in the row and fourteen men of the Royal West Kents who were sleeping inside were all wounded.

Heavy fighting was taking place in the Ypres sector, and the 5th Division was being held in reserve in case of reinforcements being required. Evidently our services were not required for the present, for on the 23rd September we marched away from here through Popperinghe to a farm a short distance from the village of Steenwoorde, a distance altogether of about 12 miles. We stayed that night in the farm outbuildings and resumed our march again the next morning, and arriving late in the afternoon at another farm close to the village of Meterin. After resting here for two days we yet again resumed our tramp, but after only a short march we reached a number of small huts where we were given to understand we should remain for the next four days. Here we were told that very soon we would once more be proceeding into the firing line to take an important part in another big offensive which was to commence on the 4th October. During our stay in these huts all preparations were made in readiness for the fray, including the handing in of our packs containing all that was not absolutely essential for our use. Having learned from experience what is chiefly required for stunts of the description of the one for which we were getting ready, a soldier carried nothing more than his equipment, waterproof sheet, one pair of socks, toothbrush, razor, towel and soap. Very frequently the circumstances even prevented one from being able to use either razor or the articles for washing oneself with.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### PREPARING FOR THE ATTACK.

ON the 1st October we left the huts in which we had been staying since the 27th September and moved once more in the direction of "The Salient." This time every man in the Company knew of the definite work for which we were setting out to do our best to accomplish. Just before reaching the Franco-Belgium Border our march took us over some beautifully wooded and hilly countryside

as yet unravaged by the terrible and relentless war which was being waged only a few miles distant. Shortly after crossing over the border into Belgium signs of warfare soon became evident, becoming more pronounced and extensive as we approached nearer to the battle front. Civilian population became thinner and thinner, and when we were yet a number of miles distant from the scene of strife we had passed the last inhabited cottage. Having marched as near to the firing line as we possibly could, we then turned northward and trudged along the now very rough roadway running parallel with the line passing through Kimmel and several small villages all more or less destroyed by shell fire, until we reached the Ypres-Comines Canal at a point about two miles south of Ypres.

On arriving at this stage of our journey we were all told to secure as much sleep as we could, as in all probability we would have to proceed into the line before morning. Most of us were laid down on the hard ground underneath our gun limbers shortly before dusk, and in spite of the roar of numerous 9in. and 12in. guns firing from positions close by, were soon sound asleep. Waking up at the first sign of dawn we found that half of the Company had proceeded into the line during the night; only No. 2 and No. 4 Sections now remained. Orders for us to move forward were received in the afternoon, and at dusk that night our little party set forth immediately followed by our two gun limbers and No. 2 Section. A party of men more jovial than were No. 4 Section on this night as we proceeded to take up our positions in the front line in readiness to go "over the top" at dawn on the 4th day of October, never set foot in the Ypres Salient.

One hour's march along a roadway thronged with troops moving forward and transport waggons containing ammunition and supplies making their nightly trip, brought us well into the fire zone. As we passed through the village of Zillebeke heavy shells began to pitch among the heap of ruins to burst with terrific detonations and send bricks and mortar flying in showers on to the roadway. When just past this village all the paraphernalia appertaining to our calling had to be taken out of the limbers and conveyed by hand for the remaining distance of nearly three miles to our front line positions. We now left the roadway and commenced to pick our way along a shell blazed cross-country track, winding sometimes in the rear and frequently under

the very muzzles of our innumerable batteries of artillery, all belching forth their missiles of death and destruction with sharp flashes of fire which stabbed out in the blackness of this October night by the thousands. On the brow of a hill above Sanctuary Wood a battery of our field guns, in front of which we were bound to pass was being heavily shelled by the Germans. Just as we reached this spot an ammunition dump about fifty yards in front of the guns was hit by one of the enemy's shells and fired. Our path was now lined on the right by the field guns which the gallant gunners were still loading and firing with great rapidity, and on the left by the blazing dump from which came a heavy shower of shrapnel and pieces of shell, whilst the Boche gun fire was tearing up the ground on all sides. My Section with the luck of the 13th passed through this lane of fire without a casualty, but the 1st Battalion Royal West Kents who were passing at the same time were not so fortunate and lost a number of men both in killed and wounded. The burning dump lit up the whole scene with a lurid glare, and I was much relieved when we had left it many yards behind us. Skirting the edge of Sanctuary Wood we presently arrived at a place called Stirling Castle, which had once been a château, but British and German guns had reduced it to a heap of ruins, among which had been constructed concrete shelters and underground strongholds. Within the security of this fortress was our Company Headquarters, and a short halt was made while our Officer reported to the C.O., and also to get the guides who were essential before we could proceed any further. This gave us an opportunity to secure a few minutes' much-needed rest. Only a few minutes elapsed before we were once more moving forward in the wake of the Royal West Kents. In the valley stretching between Stirling Castle and Inverness Copse we passed the last battery of our most advanced field artillery. The track which we were now following had at one time been marked out with white tape, but all that remained of it now was a few yards at infrequent intervals which had as yet not been blown away by bursting shells. We had now to make our way through Inverness Copse, and before entering it we could see that it was literally ablaze with the flashes from bursting shells which were falling at almost every point. The shells with which the Huns were blasting this wood were all heavy 5.9's and 8in., and many of the stunted trees that had sur-

vived all the previous shelling were being blown up by the roots and sent crashing in all directions. Our comrades in the infantry were losing many of their men from the hellish fire which was being poured across our path, and as my Section followed close in their rear we passed the huddled-up or prone forms of men laid just as they had fallen on receiving the fatal blow only a few seconds previous. Every now and then, our ears trained by many months of experience, warned us of the shells which would fall perilously close to the spot where we were, and when this was so every man would stand still for one anxious and nerve straining moment. When the shell or shells had descended with a hair-raising roar almost at our feet, we would immediately move forward again before the shower of mud and earth thrown up by the exploding shells, intermingled with flying pieces of shell, had ceased to fall upon us. We all breathed a sigh of relief when this wood and barrier of explosives had been safely passed. A further tramp of some ten minutes across open country and through another barrage of hostile shell fire brought us to our destination. Two of the teams took up their abode on the edge of the Menin Road and the remaining two teams about one hundred yards to the left of the road. Immediately in front of us was the German stronghold of Gheluvelt. The German concrete pill-boxes in which we had to stay until just before the commencement of the coming attack had been considerably battered in by our artillery when tenanted by the Boche, but they still afforded excellent shelter from the ever-falling rain of metal. In case of an emergency our machine guns were placed in position close to the entrance of our shelters.

Very shortly after arriving here the Section suffered its first casualties. A heavy shell struck the pill-box nearest the Menin Road on the side facing the enemy's line, which had already been shattered by a previous projectile, resulting in part of the wall being blown in and four men receiving wounds. This section of the Ypres front, extending from the Menin Road to Polygan Wood, a stretch of some two thousand yards, was undoubtedly one of the hottest corners during this, the third great battle of Ypres. The large masses of British artillery which were now concentrated on the Ypres front lashed out both night and day with a fierce and never-ceasing bombardment on the enemy's positions. This was responded to by the enemy with barrages, the

magnitude and fury of which eclipsed all their previous bombardments during the battles of "The Somme," "Vimy," and "Arras." During the thirty-six hours that we were in the line prior to the commencement of the attack on Passchendaele Ridge we were surrounded by a very sea of bursting shells, consisting mainly of 5.9, 8in. and 12in. shells, the concussion and vibration of which was forcibly felt within the walls of our concrete boxes. Throughout the morning and early part of the afternoon of the 3rd October the fearful artillery battle continued with unabated violence, and while on sentry duty a hail of shrapnel bullets and pieces of shell forced us to keep well in the shelter of the walls of the pill-box, and occasionally to dodge into the wide opening which served the purpose of a doorway. About two hundred and fifty yards behind the front line was a large square stone tower used by the Brigade Signal Section as a signalling station. Many were the shells that exploded with a terrific roar on this old tower, but the signallers were quite safe in the bombproof shelters built at the back.

In the afternoon it was necessary for one of us to go down to Company Headquarters for rations and also to guide into the line a party of infantrymen of the 14th Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment, who were to carry ammunition for us during the attack. The job of guide is always a thankless one, and more so when the area over which you have to guide your party is being unmercifully ploughed up by dense barrages of heavy shell fire, as was the one mile stretch of ground between our front line and Stirling Castle. This was a duty which I very frequently dropped in for, and did so again on this occasion. In company with my chum George Robinson, who had volunteered to go with me, I set out on the journey during a slight lull in the enemy's fire. On reaching Stirling Castle we had some time to wait before either the rations or our carrying party arrived, and night was coming on before we were ready to make the return journey. Our carrying party we were to guide back consisted of twenty-four men and one N.C.O. My mate headed our little party as we moved forward in Indian file, whilst I brought up the rear of our flock with the N.C.O. in the centre.

Just before we crossed the Menin Road the German artillery commenced once again to plough up the stretch of country between Inverness Copse and our front line. There

was nothing for it but to push forward and face the music. The barrage which confronted us was only from fifty to one hundred yards in depth, but the heavy shells were bursting so close together that it formed a most formidable barrier. It would have been still more formidable had not the ground been so wet and muddy. This condition of the ground prevailed in many parts of the Ypres sector, and had this not been so our exceedingly heavy casualties from shell fire would have been considerably increased. Happily we passed through this curtain of gun fire without anyone being hit with anything harder than a clot of mud. It was dusk by the time we reached the section with our carrying party and supply of rations for the next day. Among the latter was one parcel and a few letters for men in the Section.

The night of October 3rd-4th was very black and uninviting, and frequent showers of rain made the ground still more wet and greasy. By midnight the artillery duel reached a pitch of intensity greater than ever. The incessant roar and thunder of heavy ordnance, the screech of flying shells as they passed over our heads, both the enemy's and our own, and the crash of Boche shells as they exploded by the dozen on all sides of us produced a somewhat strained appearance on the faces of our little band of gunners. In spite of the annihilating enemy gun fire active preparations for the attack were in progress. The Signal Sections of the several battalions were running out telephone wires from various Headquarters in the rear to our front line, a piece of dangerous work which would, without a doubt, be completely undone by the German shell fire long before the zero hour of the approaching assault.

Numerous parties of infantrymen were carrying into the firing line reserve supplies of ammunition and bombs. These parties of men were suffering heavy casualties whilst making their way slowly through the sea of shot and shell bearing their heavy loads. One party of ten or twelve men were caught by two shells not more than fifteen yards from our guns. The first shell to burst among them killed three or four of the men, and whilst the remainder were still crouching down shrouded in a mist of fumes and smoke the second shell plunged in their midst and took even a heavier toll than the first one. To the shelter of a pill-box only a few yards from the scene of this episode the two or three survivors

made their way to dress the wounds they had most probably received.

About two hours before the British attack was timed to commence the Boche made an attempt to forestall us. Their attack, which was made on some three thousand yards of this front was broken by our artillery fire. The earth-shaking roar of our artillery must have fairly staggered the German Commanders.

Shortly after this incident we prepared for ourselves an early breakfast which consisted of the contents of the parcel received by one of the men last night in addition to our ordinary army rations. After this meal we were visited by our Officer, who was staying in another pill-box along with a number of Infantry Officers. He was quite a stranger to us, having only recently joined the 13th Machine Gun Company, and this was his maiden visit to the firing line. Our regular Section Officer who had been in charge of us since 1916 was away on a course of instruction at the Machine Gun School, Camiers.

We had a plentiful supply of rum contained in spare water-bottles, two for each gun team, and before leaving the security of our shelter at 5.30 a.m. to proceed to the point from which we were to go "over the top" we all had a tot of the liquid. A steady drizzle of rain was again falling as we made our way across the shell-ploughed and muddy ground to a shallow piece of trench some fifty yards away. On arriving at this point it still wanted twenty minutes before the time for the opening of the attack, but the Royal West Kents were already taking up their places in shell holes in the middle of "No Man's Land" in readiness to follow behind our creeping barrage as soon as it commenced to stamp and tear on the Boche positions. This 20 minutes of waiting for the curtain to be raised as it were passed painfully slow, and my watch, which I believe was the only one in good going condition, was frequently referred to. Very gradually the minute hand crept towards the hour, and at five minutes to six the water bottles containing our rum ration were handed round, and each man took not merely a wet of the lips but a drink of the invigorating spirit. We were all wet and cold with standing out in the heavy drizzle, but the warm spirit passing through the body gave a warm and refreshing feeling in addition to toning up the nerves for the fast-approaching ordeal.

Our artillery fire was now steadily slackening down, and at two minutes to the hour a big portion of our guns had become silent—the calm before the storm.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### OVER THE TOP—PASSCHENDAELE OFFENSIVE, OCTOBER 4TH, 1917.

**D**EAD on the stroke of six the British artillery crashed forth with a deafening roar, and in a few seconds a stupendous tempest of shell fire was violently pounding the German lines, which were soon blotted out of sight by a dense wall of smoke thrown off by our curtain of explosives.

The battle for possession of the dominating ridges of Passchendaele had commenced, and our infantrymen were already moving forward towards the Boche trenches and their thickly scattered concrete forts. This battle was taking place on a front of eight miles, extending from the Menin Road northwards to Houthulst Forest. The 13th Infantry Brigade was on the extreme right flank of the assault—a place of great honour, indeed, seeing that this was the most strongly held part of the enemy's line in the Ypres sector, both as regards to men and guns. Of the latter fact we were already well aware. The Germans were not long in replying to our gun fire, and hundreds of their heavy Krupp guns were soon swelling the already ear-splitting thunder and rattle of the British artillery.

Before we could go over with our machine guns we had to wait some five minutes after the opening of the attack to allow the infantry to reach the objective first and clear out any Boche troops who, having survived the bombardment, might be lurking in their battered pill-boxes or in the shell-holes round about. This precaution was always taken when machine gunners went "over the top" with the first wave of infantry, as the Vicker's machine gunner is always heavily laden with either gun, tripod, spare parts or ammunition in addition to the ordinary equipment as worn by the infantryman, and spades for digging in on arriving at the objective. Thus hampered the "little gunners," as we were sometimes called, were practically unable to defend themselves until the objective was reached and they were relieved of their cumbersome loads.

During the short time that we had been waiting in the "kicking off" trench our Officer had been in the Kents' Headquarters, a pill-box close by, but at five minutes past six he came out, and shouting to us he scrambled out of the trench. What he had shouted to us had been utterly drowned by the fearful din, but on seeing him get out of the trench and make for the enemy's lines waving his walking cane above his head we all picked up our loads and followed him over the top.

The Germans had brought to bear on us innumerable batteries of machine guns, whilst many others on the right of the Menin Road were pouring a heavy infilading fire across our front. This terrible hail of bullets had already mowed down the Royal West Kents like a scythe plied in a field of corn. A large number of wounded men were straggling back and making their way as best they could to the Dressing Station, which was a good mile away in the rear.

Before my Section had advanced many yards more than half of the gunners had been placed *hors de combat*, including all the members of my team with the exception of myself. A sergeant and one man, both of whom had been with the Section a long time, were shot dead by a German who fired at them from behind a pill-box; one of these bullets also wounded another man in the chest. Two men were also very badly wounded by shell fire, one of whom had his foot terribly mutilated and the other had his thigh fractured. Machine gun fire took a toll of seven or eight, all more or less seriously wounded. Among the latter was a man who had his throat pierced by a bullet, whilst a second had both legs fractured.

While we were yet only half-way to our objective, the crest of Gheluvelt Hill, the Boche began to train his heavy guns on our old front line and the ground over which we had just passed. Many of the shells of this barrage fell either in front of us or very close behind, and not by any means improving our crossing. This curtain of explosives also caught great numbers of wounded men who were slowly picking their way across the rough and muddy ground, whilst many of the more unfortunate men who lay strewn on the ground over which the advance had taken place, rendered incapable of helping themselves, received still further wounds, not a few of which proved fatal.

When going over the top an unwounded soldier cannot drop behind to attend to a wounded mate, but must keep going forward and leave all wounded men for the Battalion Stretcher Bearers to attend to. Should the number of seriously wounded men be very large it was nearly always the lot of many of the stricken soldiers to have to lie on the shell swept and frequently muddy ground just where they had fallen for many hours, and sometimes as long as two and even three nights and days.

Just before reaching the objective I slipped on the edge of a huge shell crater some eight or more feet deep and went rolling to the bottom, half strangling myself, what with my equipment, box respirator and two spare part cases which I had slung over my shoulders, in addition to a two-gallon tin full of water in one hand. Very faintly I heard a comrade in arms calling down to me inquiring where I had been hit; this I was able to answer in the negative. On climbing out of this shell hole I saw two officers standing in another shell crater some 30 to 40 yards away eagerly scanning the wilderness over which we had just advanced. One of them was my Section Officer, so I set off in that direction. Here I found a sergeant and three men of No. 4 Section, whilst a few infantrymen were scattered about in the shell holes close by. The Infantry Officer had just counted his men, and the total including himself was nineteen. These were the remnants of "C" Company, 1st Battalion Royal West Kent Regiment, who had gone over the top fifteen minutes previous with a total of about one hundred and fifty men. My Section, including our Officer, numbered six out of a total of twenty-two, and of the twenty-five infantrymen attached to us for carrying ammunition not one of them had reached the objective.

We immediately commenced to make gun positions on the edge of the shell hole for our two machine guns, one of which, however, was minus its tripod. At the same time the infantrymen were hard at work linking together a number of shell holes to form a sort of trench. The enemy's shell fire was now falling immediately behind us, and casualties were soon inflicted on our little garrison. In less than fifteen minutes from the time that we commenced digging operations three men of the West Kents had been fatally hit by pieces of shell. Just behind me I noticed a man industriously cutting out a piece of trench, and probably a couple of min-

utes after first noticing him I had occasion to turn round again, but this time I found him laid on his back with death plainly written on his face. The only sign of any wound was a tiny red mark on his temple, evidently caused by a very small piece of shrapnel indeed, yet it had been quite big enough to kill him on the spot. These four men were presently lifted out of the shell hole by their mates and put into others behind what may now be termed our new front line trench. A heavy shrapnel shell bursting overhead wounded our sergeant in the back and one of the infantrymen in his right hand.

Presently a runner from the Headquarters of the Royal West Kents brought a message to the Captain, the officer in charge of the few infantrymen around us. This message stated that he had to withdraw his men to the old front line again as the troops on our immediate left had failed to reach their final objective. Having gained the objective at such a terrible cost in men killed and wounded, it was only natural that the two officers should be up against this order to retire. After a short discussion with our Officer, the Captain of the Kents decided to ignore the message and hold on to this piece of high ground overlooking the stronghold of Gheluvelt, which lay about one hundred yards in front of us. The light was quite good now, and amid the ruins of the village before us and among the shell-shattered trees close by could be seen numbers of German soldiers flitting about. As the work of connecting the line of shell holes together was completed the men commenced sniping at the Boche troops, whilst with our machine gun we sprayed the enemy's positions with short bursts of bullets. Our supply of ammunition was far from being plentiful, so that we had to be very sparing with our fire. A good deal of ammunition was collected from the dead and from the numerous sets of equipment that had been cast off by wounded men. As there were plenty of spare rifles lying about us, we gunners each took up one, and while two were firing the machine gun the other two did a bit of sniping.

The German snipers were very troublesome, and it was very risky for anyone to show themselves on the top for more than a few seconds together, as one of the Kents learnt to his cost. For some reason or other this man climbed out of his shell-hole a few yards on the left of our gun and started to run across the top. Before he had taken half-a-dozen

strides a Boche rifle cracked out but the bullet missed its mark. A chorus of voices now shouted at him to drop down, but almost at the same time another shot rang out and the man fell to the ground with a cry of agony. A spade was passed out to him, and as he grasped at it he was pulled to the edge of the shell-hole, where we had our gun, and lifted into safety. The bullet had hit him in the back and passed right through him, but had miraculously missed all fatal organs. He was laid on his back in the centre, and as this was a very large shell crater he did not hamper the movements of the men.

The intense drum fire of our artillery which had been maintained for some time after the commencement of the attack calmed down a little at about nine o'clock, but it was only for a very short time. A few minutes later it again crashed forth with great violence, and with its resumption we came under the most nerve-trying and demoralizing conditions it is possible for a soldier to be under—that of being shelled by one's own artillery. The shells from one or more batteries of our field guns suddenly crashed on and all round our makeshift of a trench, and one of the shells which dropped in the shell hole three yards to the right of our gun pit, where the two officers were sitting, killed our machine gun officer outright. The Captain of the Kents was severely shaken, but escaped being hit, which was very singular indeed.

Our Officer had evidently had an intimation that he was going to be killed, for less than half-an-hour before his death he told us that he had no valuables upon him. His prismatic compass and maps he told us to take off him should he be killed. Everything was so completely smashed up, however, that we were unable to do as he had wished. Even his revolver was smashed to atoms.

Immediately after this occurrence the men on the look-out shouted out that large numbers of enemy reinforcements were swarming into the ruined village of Gheluvélt. Although the Kents' Captain had been terribly shaken by the bursting shell which had killed his fellow officer only a few minutes previously, on hearing this cry of Boche reinforcements he at once jumped up and called upon every man to open a steady fire upon the German troops. At the same time as he gave this order he set us a good example by snatching up a rifle and being the first to open fire on the enemy. For

the next twenty minutes or more the sixteen or so rifles and one machine gun which we could bring to bear on the German reinforcements crackled merrily over the edges of our line of shell holes. The Germans were very plain to see as they hurried in strings of from six to a dozen to their various destinations. They presented, however, very difficult targets as they passed through the ruined houses, and bobbed in and out of what appeared to be numerous shallow trenches, but a good many of them would require a trip to the Fatherland as the results of this rifle practice, whilst a few, no doubt, finished their career for ever.

Between us four machine gunners we still had a supply of rum which helped to tone up our nerves considerably. The remainder of this red-letter day passed without any further casualties being inflicted upon our small garrison, and as the enemy made no attempts to counterattack our position from the village of Gheluvelt the hours passed by with only occasional rifle shots or a splutter of machine gun fire being exchanged. Shortly after midday, however, considerable excitement and joy was caused by the arrival of some fifteen reinforcements, also of the 1st Battalion Royal West Kents, and, better still, they brought two Lewis guns with them. Several of the infantrymen went into raptures of delight, and went so far as to put their tin hats on the points of their bayonets and waved them high in the air.

Heavy artillery fire was maintained all day by both sides, and we were frequently harrassed by the fire from our own artillery which continued to fall about our positions. Most of the German shell fire, however, fell well behind our trench, and did not cause us a great deal of anxiety. Early in the day one of our gunners and one of the infantrymen had volunteered to try and get a message through to one of the Headquarters in the rear to get the artillery firing upon us to increase their range. With the approach of night these two men had not returned, neither had the offending batteries of guns increased their range. As soon as darkness began to veil the enemy from sight half of our garrison kept a sharp look-out while the other half snatched an hour's sleep huddled up underneath their muddy ground sheets in the bottom of the shell holes and connecting ditches. The night was very dark and heavy showers of rain fell frequently.

In the early hours of the morning we were very much scared by some Germans who came running to us from the

rear. Being so very dark it was impossible to make out whether they carried arms or not, or whether more were coming up behind, and I was not by myself in thinking that the Germans had broken through on our flanks and cut us off. They turned out to be, however, Germans who had come to give themselves up. This was not discovered until after one of the Kents had fired a shot which inflicted a bad wound on one of them.

Before daybreak the two men who had set out on the morning of the 4th for the purpose of taking a message through to our artillery returned from their fruitless quest. The Boche gun fire had destroyed all telephonic communications, and continued with such unabating fury that they had to keep to the shelter of a pill-box until a safer passage presented itself so that they could make the return journey. About the same hour another of our machine gunners, in company with one of the carrying party of infantrymen, turned up. The gunner, who was one of my staunch companions, said that he was caught in the heavy curtain of shell fire, which the Germans trained upon our old front line shortly after we went over the top, and had been unable to leave the safety of a concrete shelter until long after midnight. Between them they had brought four belts of machine gun ammunition and two gallons of water, both of which were welcome additions to our supplies which were becoming very scanty.

Yet shortly after daybreak another party of four men made their appearance in our midst. They were machine gunners and had come from Company Headquarters at Stirling Castle to reinforce my Section. Having set out early the previous evening they had been wandering about all night trying to find us, and in the dark had almost walked into the enemy's lines. They had also brought with them our rations and a bag containing a number of letters, papers and one parcel. All the mails, however, were addressed to men who had either been killed, wounded or were missing, with the exception of one newspaper which was addressed to myself. Since our meal in the early hours of the morning of October 4th we had had nothing but a piece of dry bread and a hard biscuit or two which we had in our haversacks, washed down with a drink of water. We now had enough food to feed a whole Section, and in the parcel, which of course we meant to dispose of, were a number of cocoa

tablets and a tin of condensed milk. One or two small pieces of candle wrapped in strips of bagging were soon burning underneath a canteen of water in a small recess in the side of the shell hole, and in a very short time we had a pint of boiling hot cocoa ready for drinking. A drink of this hot beverage was given to the infantryman who had been shot through the body twenty-four hours ago, and who still lay quite contentedly on his back in the shell hole. We still had some rum left in a bottle and this was emptied into our cocoa. Very little was left of the parcel after we had finished our breakfast and a loaf of bread was considerably reduced.

For two or three hours after break of day the German snipers were very active, and an infantryman who carelessly exposed himself on the top had his brains blown out by an explosive bullet.

In the middle of the morning we had an unexpected visit from our Company's Second-in-Command and the Sergeant-Major. They had experienced great difficulty in locating our whereabouts. He gave each of us a tot from his water-bottle and promised to have us relieved as soon as possible. From our visitors we learned that our C.O. had been wounded on the morning of the 4th, and that each of our four Sections had suffered very heavy casualties. (This Officer was killed by a sniper shortly after leaving our position.) Early in the afternoon strong reinforcements were again seen entering the Boche front line in front of us, and once again we opened out a sharp fire upon them. During the day aircraft could be seen flying over various parts of the firing line for the first time since the opening of this offensive. One German airman flew his machine over our positions at a very low altitude for some time, during which we had to keep very squat and still. No ill results, however, followed this close scrutiny of our fortifications and its garrison by the enemy's airman.

Another long night of vigilance in the cold and heavy drizzles on this bleak and muddy brow of Gheluvelt Hill was once more upon us. The crash and thunder of heavy gun fire from both sides still continued with great violence. Shells from our own artillery still fell round about, whilst many from the Boche guns also began to burst too close to be comfortable. Quite early in the night a salvo of shells from a battery of our own artillery crashed with a sickening roar upon a short piece of trench to the right of our gun, killing

three or more infantrymen. This was the first of a series of similar catastrophes which befell our quickly-diminishing garrison. The climax was reached about two o'clock on the morning of the 6th, at which time the S.O.S. signal was sent up by the troops away on our left in the vicinity of Polderhoeke Château. While the coloured lights of the British signal of distress were yet floating brightly in the blackness of the night the thousands of guns away in our rear commenced to belch forth their iron bolts, and in a few seconds the ground beneath our feet was fairly rocking from the terrible vibration. Standing close up against the parapet of our crude trench as our only means of protection from the shower of shrapnel both from the Boche shell fire and our own we waited for the tempestuous storm of fire to cease. All at once I heard the awe-inspiring downward roar of a hail of our own shells which I knew were bound to fall close by. Pressing closer to the damp wall of earth I held my breath for the inevitable. A second later our position was a veritable inferno. One of the shells burst with a loud report immediately above my head, and at the same time a considerable portion of the parapet was blown away, under which I became partly buried. Following the explosion of this shell and many others which had also burst in the vicinity came the cries of the wounded and mutilated men from all sides. Close by our gun position alone six men were wounded and one killed. Of the wounded two were machine gunners belonging to my Section, which was now reduced to three men. Among the infantrymen was one man who had lost his sight, whilst their Captain, the only surviving officer, had sustained two broken legs besides other wounds. All the wounded men who could walk lost no time in making their way in the direction of the far-distant Dressing Station. The badly wounded men, of whom there were several, we lifted into more sheltered places to wait until such time as stretcher bearers would be available to carry them away. Our total strength now numbered not more than eight or nine men. For the next hour we lived in the hopes of being relieved, and all the time we strained our ears to catch, above the din and crash of the gun duel which was still in progress, the sound of their approach. Our hopes were not in vain, for eventually we heard voices calling out from behind us for the Royal West Kents. The two or three men of "C" Company of that regiment answered this cry,

which came from a long string of men who could now be seen making their way in our direction. In another minute a Company of the 1st Battalion East Surrey Regiment some 150 strong had taken over the defence of Gheluvelt Hill. A section of machine gunners also turned up about ten minutes later, and much to our relief they brought no guns with them, having received instructions to take over our guns and gun equipment. After a hurried explanation of the situation in general we clambered out of the position we had held for the last forty odd hours and proceeded with all haste out of the line.

We had not got very far, however, before we got caught in a heavy barrage of German 5.9's, but once again the heavy, spongy condition of the ground saved us. Reaching the shelter of a pill-box we halted for a minute to regain our breath and then made another dash through the sea of bursting shells which carried us past the zone covered by the Boche artillery. In negotiating this curtain of enemy shell fire we went too far to our left, and instead of having to pass through Inverness Copse we found ourselves compelled to pass through the Dumbarton Lakes. This was a very treacherous piece of ground, being one large swamp crossed by means of a duckboard track, much of which had now been destroyed by German gun fire. After safely crossing this obstacle we got on to a wooden road, one of many which had been built all over the salient by our corps of Engineers and Pioneer Battalions. About five o'clock we reached our Divisional Headquarters, which was close to the spot from which we had set out on the night of October 2nd for the never-to-be-forgotten assault on October 4th, 1917.

### CHAPTER XXIII.

#### THE PASSCHENDAELE OFFENSIVE OF AUTUMN, 1917.— CONTINUED.

**W**HEN the 13th Infantry Brigade was relieved the survivors of the various Battalions straggled in small numbers to the Divisional Headquarters which was the pre-arranged collecting place. Here the Battalion cooks had been hard at work during the night, and as the mud-bespattered and weary men arrived they were given a substantial breakfast consisting of oatmeal porridge, fried bacon, bread and tea. As the Brigade had been reduced in strength

by a casualty list of about 75 per cent. there was more than sufficient food for the ravenous crowd of men, even after second and third helpings had been freely given. Being only a Company with a total strength of some one hundred and sixty odd men, my unit did not possess a field cooker, and even if we had our cooks were not here. We had to rely on the generosity of the infantry for some breakfast. On approaching a Quarter-Master-Sergeant of the 1st Battalion King's Own Scottish Borderers he at once gave us enough food to satisfy three times our number, and told us to help ourselves to what tea and porridge we required. Rum was also being freely served out, and our friend the Quarter-Block poured a very liberal quantity into our tea from a two-gallon jar. "You can come again" were his parting words.

By eight a.m. some fifteen men and one officer of the 18th Machine Gun Company had collected here, and as soon as each man had had a meal we set off to march to our transport lines, which were in a field close to Dickebusch Lake. Arriving at our destination we lost no time in making for the tents placed at our disposal, and after another drink of hot tea and rum we prepared for an extra long sleep. Later in the day a roll-call was made, and as the names of some sixty odd men were called out the remark of killed, wounded or missing had to be made against them.

The following morning, October 7th, the 13th Infantry Brigade was addressed by the Divisional General and thanked for the good services we had rendered on October 4th and 5th. This same day my Company had to send a number of gun teams into the line again. For this emergency only twenty men and two or three N.C.O.'s were available as fit to proceed into the firing line, and consisted of those who had been left at the transport lines in reserve during the October 4th stunt and a few men belonging to the Section that did not go over the top on that date. At dusk this party, in charge of one Officer, left with a battery of four guns.

On the 8th the whole of the 13th Brigade moved further back to a place called Chippawa Camp, near a village called Westoutre, for a much-needed rest and to be made up again. A few days later the Brigade was reinforced by at least fifteen hundred men. My Company was brought up to its proper strength on receiving a batch of nearly one hundred gunners and several officers. Among our reinforcements was one gunner who came out to France from Grantham at the same

time as myself, and he had been wounded three times, including one which kept him in England for eight months.

The number of killed and wounded in my Company had been still further increased by five and four respectively. These casualties had been inflicted upon the four gun teams which went into action on the night of October 7th. On the 10th they were subjected to a murderous shell fire which completely destroyed the four guns and the trench which they were manning in addition to the casualties.

All the time we were at rest "Jerry" came over practically every night, and also during the day-time, dropping his bombs broadcast. Luckily for us they missed Chippawa Camp, although one afternoon an enemy airman dropped one within 200 yards of our parade field.

On Oct. 24th the Company again went into the same section of the firing line as before, in readiness for another attack which was to take place on the 26th. I was lucky enough to be included in the 25 per cent. party which always stayed in the transport lines. My Section went into the line thirty strong, and twenty-eight of them were new men just out from Blighty. Nos. 1 and 3 Sections were going over the top; No. 2 Section was for barrage positions, and No. 4 Section was in reserve. Before the attack came off, however, No. 4 Section had to reinforce the Sections going over the top. Once again our troops attacking in front of Gheluvelt and round Poelderhoek Château met with strong resistance from the enemy and our men were eventually forced to fall back. When this withdrawal took place the infantry failed to warn two of our gun teams, resulting in both guns being captured and two gunners being taken prisoners. In trying to get away from the Germans the Officer in charge of No. 3 Section was shot through the head. Heavy rain had been falling night and day since the Company went into the line. All the transport fields were a foot or more deep with mud; the roads and tracks leading up to the firing line were converted into rivers of mud and water; whilst the entire length and breadth of the Ypres battlefield was one large swamp, through which our men had to struggle almost knee deep even along the beaten tracks leading into the line. If a man got off these tracks he would in all probability become instantly engulfed up to the waist in the soft mud.

During the four days that the Company was in action I made two trips into the line. On the first occasion I went

to the Company Headquarters with the ration limber, but the second time I went in company with a small party of our men, including members of the transport section with mules, for the purpose of extricating a limber from a large shell hole into which it had been driven the previous night. We experienced great difficulty in freeing it from its muddy bed and getting it safely on to the timber cart track again. Whilst the work was in progress one of the mules attached to the drag ropes rolled, together with the unfortunate driver, into a large shell hole full of water. This transport driver very luckily sustained nothing worse than a good ducking.

The morning of October 28th saw for the second time this month the remnants of the 13th Machine Gun Company straggling back to the transport lines. Each of the four Sections had again been seriously depleted, and both our new Captain and Second-in-Command had been wounded. My Section, part of which had been in reserve, had sustained fourteen casualties, all among the reinforcements who had joined us about a fortnight ago. They included two men who had been taken prisoners by the Germans and two killed. All the men who returned were in a deplorable condition, being caked from head to foot with a thick layer of soft mud, and it was impossible to recognize in them the smart, clean body of men who had marched into the line on October 24th. It was a terrible breaking in for our reinforcements, and especially for those who had never been in the firing line before.

For the next few days we remained under canvas by the transport field, during which time we were kept busy overhauling our guns and gun equipment ready for our next trip to the scene of this appalling autumn offensive.

Almost every night the Boche aeroplanes flew over our lines dropping bombs upon our thickly scattered camps. They caused many casualties among both men and horses, but the Camp of the 13th M.G. Company miraculously escaped from these destructive missiles from the air, although every night a number of them would fall within a radius of two or three hundred yards. One night, however, a huge torpedo fell in the roadway running alongside the field in which our camp was situated. Yet on another occasion two light spring shrapnel bombs landed upon the wall of sand-bags built round a tent erected in the next field, less than fifty yards away, and wounded several sergeants and

one officer. Only the previous afternoon members of our Company had vacated this very tent, to make room for some men of another Company.

Before the Company again went into action an advanced ammunition dump had to be made on the Menin Road beyond Clapham Junction, and a party of about twenty men, both gunners and drivers, and in which I was numbered, were warned for the job. At four o'clock on the morning of October 31st we left the camp for a dump close to the three cross roads, known as Shrapnel Corner, about one mile south of Ypres. Each one of us was in charge of a mule, and on arriving here the animals were loaded with ammunition, some with two boxes and others with four boxes. My four-legged companion, which was called "the donkey," was the smallest animal we had, yet it was burdened with four of the boxes. As soon as the last animal was loaded we set off in Indian file down the Menin Road, and three-quarters of an hour later we reached a point close to Clapham Junction, where we hastily dumped the ammunition into shell holes on the side of this much battered road. The German artillery had been strangely quiet while we had been slowly winding our way into the line, but for the last few hundred yards of our journey the roadway bore every sign of having recently been heavily shelled. The smell of explosives and gas was very strong, whilst newly-made craters obstructed our path at every few yards, and close by many of these lay groups of dead "Tommies" who had quite evidently been killed only recently.

On commencing the homeward journey we all mounted our respective mules and were able to travel at a much quicker pace than before. Several small shells burst just in front of us before we had gone far, but this marked point was passed safely. As we were nearing the village of Zillebeke the enemy commenced to shell two of the three roads which met at this point. Luckily for us we happened to be on the road not being strafed, but the heavy 9in. shells, which were tearing up the two tracks not more than fifty to seventy-five yards on either side of us, sent showers of pieces of shell and shrapnel bullets across our path. Several artillery horses travelling on the same road as ourselves were hit, but we sustained no casualties amongst either men or mules.

The afternoon of the first day of November saw my Company once more making its way into the firing line. Heavy shell fire was being poured into Sanctuary Wood as we slowly filed through along the duckboard tracks. My Section took over a line of battered pill-boxes about half-a-mile or more in front of Clapham Junction and some four or five hundred yards behind the front line just below Poelderhoeke Château. Beyond being harrassed by the continuous heavy curtains of shell fire which fell around us night and day, we were left in peace in our concrete shelters until the night of the 5th, when preparations had to be made for the forthcoming attack which was to take place early the following morning. Before the hour for the attack to commence our four guns were all mounted and carefully laid ready for firing a barrage as soon as the time was ripe. The thunder of thousands of pieces of ordnance heralded forth the commencement of the assault, and in a few seconds a tremendous storm of shells were speeding on their way to the still strongly held German positions round Gheluveld and Poelderhoeke Château. I had my gun mounted on the top of a pill-box, from which I could distinctly see the dense wall of smoke over the Boche lines caused by the British curtain of shell fire. Between our front line and my Section's guns the German barrage in retaliation was churning up once more the already much ploughed land. The German shells were soon bursting on all sides of our gun positions, and several burst immediately in front of my elevated post, whilst another heavy shell burst just behind myself and the man who was doing the work of No. 2 gunner for me. When this last shell burst it put out all the candles which the rest of our comrades were burning inside the concrete shelter, where the work of re-filling the emptied belts was being carried on. These men quickly came to the entrance to see what damage it had done, but it had only disturbed a few blocks of concrete. At one of the gun teams several belts were cut to pieces by shrapnel, but no casualties were sustained. We kept our guns firing for about one hour, after which each of the four guns were dismounted and thoroughly overhauled in turn. A considerable amount of ammunition had been expended, and a further supply had to be carried from the reserve dump near Clapham Junction.

Early on the morning of the 9th November I had to make a journey down to Company Headquarters at Stirling

Castle for the purpose of guiding into the line another Section of gunners who were to relieve my Section. When these positions had been handed over we went some seven or eight hundred yards further back to a pill-box at Clapham Junction. Between our late positions and the Menin Road were a large number of derelict tanks firmly embedded in the soft mud, and these were being heavily shelled at the time we were crossing, one being set on fire. Then just before we reached our destination a heavy shell burst almost in the doorway of our new home, which made us get a move on and inside out of harm's way before the next missile came over. No more shells come over just then, however, so we at once commenced to cook our breakfast. A fire was soon blazing in the trench which ran in front of the pill-box, and over this tins of water were suspended and fat, salty bacon was fried. Breakfast was almost ready when another Boche shell crashed almost on top of our improvised cookhouse and closed up part of the trench. It was remarkable that no one was hit, although two or three men were by the fire superintending the cooking. A large portion of our bacon went west, being buried underneath a heap of earth, and a lot of our "char" was upset, whilst the fire was extinguished. Shortly after this disturbance another 5.9 burst right in front of the doorway of our shelter, just inside of which several of us were standing at the time. The rush of air caused by the explosion was tremendous, blowing us almost off our feet. One man was hit on the head by a stone and very much stunned, and the exceptionally long hair worn by our sergeant shot up like the bristles on the back of a porcupine.

No more shells dropped so close until night-time. I was on sentry for the first two hours after midnight, and just before I was relieved shells commenced to fall near by. The man who had relieved me very shortly came inside the shelter and warned us all that the smell of gas outside was very strong. Gas shells could now be heard bursting in great numbers outside, and as the gas began to penetrate into our shelter we decided to put our gas helmets on until the shelling ceased. Our domain was practically in darkness, as owing to a scarcity of candles we could only afford to have one lit by our telephone which was fixed in one corner. It is impossible to do much talking with one's head encased in a gas-mask, with the nose

nipped by a device to prevent you from breathing by that organ, and with a broad mouth-piece in the mouth, therefore silence more or less reigned supreme for several minutes. This silence was soon broken, however, by a muffled shout and a deal of spluttering from a youth who hailed from Lancashire. He soon had the offending respirator off his head, and no persuading could get him to put it on again. Shortly after this episode, however, the strafing with gas shells ceased and the air soon began to smell fresher, sufficient for all masks to be removed.

The whole of the 5th Division was to be relieved on the 11th November, but my Section, which had now been in the line over nine days, received orders to proceed to our transport lines on the morning of the 10th. On our way out we had to pass through Sanctuary Wood, the track through which was being heavily shelled. To obviate the necessity of making a second journey from Clapham Junction to the timber cart track beyond this wood, each man had to take almost double the usual load. My portion was made up of one gun in case, spare part wallet, and one box of ammunition\* (250 rounds), a total weight of about eighty pounds. Half-way through this wood we passed the spot where only a very short while before on this same morning No. 3 Section's ration party had been caught by a shell, and several of them either killed or wounded. On reaching the timber roadway we placed our loads on the side to be conveyed later on by our transport limbers. Resuming our journey to the rear all went well until we had just passed Zillebeke, at which point we had to pass a battery of 8in. howitzers which was being shelled by the Germans. The battery was in position only a few yards off the roadway, and the shells were bursting up and down the road for a distance of over 100 yards. We had almost got past this danger zone, in fact a number of our mates were already past it, when a shower of shrapnel and pieces of shell caught one of our men who was walking somewhat leisurely along a little way behind our main party. It so happened that he was hit quite close to a R.A.M.C. Aid Post, from which several men ran to his assistance. This was my Section's only casualty during this spell of ten days that we had been in the firing line.

On reaching the transport lines we first of all secured a few hours sleep, after which we set about ourselves with soap, water and razors in an effort to make ourselves

presentable. Not a single man in the Section had been able to have a wash during the last ten days, and only one had shaved, and then only on one occasion at the expense of using some of his precious drinking water. Although most of the shell holes near by had been full of water, we had not been allowed to use it owing to it having been contaminated by gas, and when used would in most cases burn the skin very severely.

The following day, November 11th, the remainder of the Company came out of the line, and early on the morning of the 12th we marched away with our backs towards the famous salient.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### THE FIFTH DIVISION GOES TO ITALY.

ON leaving the camp near Dickebusche Lake we went to the village of Westhoutre, where we stayed for two days. During the night of the 15th-16th November we entrained at a railhead about three miles away, and after a journey of some fifteen hours detrained at a small station just outside the town of St. Pol. From here we marched to a small straggling village situated on the main road about three miles outside this town. Several rumours were flying about just now as to where we were destined for. Some said we were being sent into the line at Cambrai, and others that we were going to Italy. The last one eventually proved to be correct, and on the 30th November, 1917, the first half of the Company entrained for the long journey. My Section was included with the second half, and the following afternoon, December 1st, we also boarded a train.

Although we were confronted with a train journey of many hundreds of miles, and which would take a number of days to accomplish, our coaches were customary trucks bearing those well-known words and figures: "40 hommes, 8 chevaux." During the first night we passed through the French capital, Paris, and by daybreak we were well down in the South of France. The country through which we were now travelling was much more interesting than the North, and being many miles from the scene of the war no signs of its ruthless destruction marred our view of the peaceful looking villages and towns. Late in the afternoon we reached the seaport of Marseilles in which station we stayed

for about one hour before commencing the next stage of our journey along the southern coast of France. For the next three days we had the privilege of viewing the beautiful scenery which is to be seen on the Riviera. A few yards away from one side of the railroad was the blue Mediterranean Sea, and on the other side were the most picturesque of villages and towns and large palace-like private residences, built high up on the rugged cliffs and hills. The British troops were greeted with great enthusiasm all along the coast, huge crowds of people being assembled in all the big stations through which we passed.

At almost every station in which we stopped for any length of time ladies of the British Red Cross Society were there waiting on the platforms with gifts of fruit, chocolate, cigarettes and matches, and if it was night time coffee with rum was served out to us. Picture postcards were also given to us, and any soldier who desired to send one to his people in Blighty could do so by handing them back to these ladies, who undertook to post them for us free of charge. In the afternoon of the fourth day our train crossed over the French border into Italian territory. The weather was delightfully warm all along the Riviera, and during the day time we were able to sit at the doorways of the trucks with our tunics off. On the night of the 5th December we arrived at the Italian seaport of Genoa, where we remained for about two hours. A large number of Italian soldiers were on the platforms, and our men, ever on the look-out for souvenirs, were soon making friendly advances to them, and soliciting one or more of the nickel stars worn on the tunic collar by the Italian soldier. When the journey was once more resumed we left the coast behind us and commenced travelling inland. There was now a marked change from the warm sunshine we had been enjoying all along the coasts to severe frosts and heavy showers of snow. Late on the night of the 6th our train came to a stop and remained stationary for some considerable time. Word was sent down the length of the train that we were nearing our destination, but that we should not be detraining before daylight. It was a bitter cold night, and before daybreak a heavy fall of snow was on the ground. Our train eventually pulled into a siding in the station of Barbarano. When we had all got off the train we proceeded to the Town Hall, where each man received a thick slice of bread and jam and a mug of

cocoa. With the exception of a little bread we had been able to buy from either the French or the Italians on the route this was the first bread we had had since first boarding the train. Our army rations consisted of bully and biscuits, and this daily menu would not be changed for another week or more.

From here we made a two hours march which brought us into a small village where we stayed for one night. On the next day, December 8th, we marched out of this village amid a curious crowd of villagers, and late in the afternoon, after a long weary march, we arrived at another village called Nanto. We stayed in this village for the next seven days, during which time we were kept busy cleaning our equipment and polishing up generally. All of us who wore webbing equipment had perforce to use plenty of soap, water and a brush to remove all the grime and soot which had settled on it from the coal fires we had been having in our trucks during the recent train journey. In France we had always been too busy entertaining "Jerry" to spare much time in cleaning our "harness," but now that we were away from the muddy trenches we were given strict orders always to turn out on parade as clean and as spruce as it is possible for a soldier on active service to make himself. Whenever we were out on a march strict march discipline was adhered to, and as the British troops were not being immediately rushed up to the Italian battle front it appeared as though we had been brought into the country merely for the purpose of showing the Italians how well disciplined we were, and to give them renewed courage to "carry on."

On December 16th we were once more marching in the direction of the Italian Alps, which towered high in the air many miles in front of us. Towards night time the flash of guns and bursting shells could be distinctly seen on these mountains. At the end of a five or six hours' march we found ourselves in a small village some three miles west of the town of Chittadella called Facka. Three-parts of the Company was billeted in barns and storerooms in the village, but my Section and the transport drivers had to proceed to a farmhouse about one mile away from the village. The Company was to be stationed here for an indefinite period, and having arrived a number of days before Christmas it gave us plenty of time in which to get accustomed to our

new quarters and to make preparations for the coming Festival.

A few days before December 25th a number of geese and ducks were purchased from the various farms in the village and plucked in readiness to be cooked for the feast. Christmas Day saw every member of the Company occupied in making preparations for the men's dinner. My Section Officer visited one farmhouse and purchased 100 litres of Italian red wine, or "Vino" as it is called by the Italians, and it took four of us to carry it to our billet. The Signora at our billet very kindly placed at our disposal two of her rooms, together with the use of plates, dishes, cutlery, &c., so that we were enabled at two o'clock in the afternoon to sit down to our dinner in quite good style. Dinner was a great success, compared with the usual army fare, and was thoroughly enjoyed by all. After dinner wine was imbibed very freely, and quite early in the afternoon many of the men were suffering from the effects of this drink, several of whom had to take to their blankets and sleep it off. By four o'clock three-parts of the Company had congregated in the large yard outside my Section's billet, drawn no doubt by the vino which was being supplied to all comers. Our Officers were also represented in force, and our Transport Officer, who was something of a comedian, mounted one of the farm waggons which had been dragged into the centre of the yard and commenced to sing a number of ditties to the delight of all. This Officer was then joined by our Quarter-Master-Sergeant, and together they cracked jokes, sang humorous songs, &c., from their crude platform. The merriment continued until evening, but it was still quite early when the Company began to depart to their respective billets.

On Boxing Day morning there were many complaints of bad heads. When the Christmas Festivities were passed we had to settle down to daily parades in earnest. The first parade in the morning was usually a run of four or five miles, followed by machine gun drill, &c. Our daily parades terminated at midday, and after two o'clock in the afternoon we were free to leave our billets. We paid frequent visits to the town of Chittadella. The road leading into this town was quite straight, and like all the main roads in Italy was lined on either side with a ditch about ten feet across and eight feet deep. It was from these ditches, which were invariably full of water, that the boys and women who worked

on the roads baled their water with which to slack the dust on the road. There is no protection whatever from these ditches, and many were the carts and lorries I saw upturned in them. The recklessness of the Italian transport drivers did not tend to alleviate these mishaps.

During the third week of January, 1918, the 5th Division at last received orders to proceed to the Piave front. The 13th Machine Gun Company moved away from the village of Facka on January 21st, and after a two days' march we arrived at a small town called Montebelluna, situated some five miles from the right bank of the River Piave, close to the Montello Hills.

## CHAPTER XXV.

ON THE PIAVE FRONT, JANUARY—MARCH, 1918.

**T**HE town of Montebelluna being so close to the firing line was full of Italian troops and transports. Each evening long strings of pack mules left for the trenches on the banks of the River Piave laden with bags of bread, large chest-like cases in which hot food was conveyed to the men, and large quantities of wine. The day that we arrived here all the surrounding country was shrouded from view by a heavy mist which did not clear until the following morning, leaving the atmosphere very clear and bright. Our range of view was now excellent, and we were all very much surprised to see that the rugged and imposing heights of a long range of mountains stretched from the left of this town on the far side of the River Piave as far as the eye could see.

Very little activity appeared to be taking place in the line, and the only signs of hostilities was a little bombing at night time; a deal of erratic Archie fire by both sides at venturesome airmen during the day, whilst artillery fire was practically nil.

On the evening of the 24th January, the 5th Division commenced to take over a section of the Piave front on the right of Nervesa. My Company left the large billet we had been occupying early in the evening and proceeded down a roadway leading from Montebelluna, through a large village called Salvo, to another smaller village called Arcada. This road was choked with troops and transport waggons from one end to the other, and it took us two or more hours to cover

a distance of four miles. Beyond the heavy rumble of transports and the sound of our columns of troops as they marched along all was quiet. Once a single Italian field gun broke the stillness by firing one shell, the sound of which echoed and re-echoed among the hills for a surprisingly long time. On arriving at Arcada we unloaded our guns and conveyed them by hand to our respective positions. My Section was in the reserve positions for the first four days of our stay in the line, and which were about half-a-mile from the river. Each day the Austrians would send over a number of shells between our guns and the river, and quite a number used to crash into the houses in Arcada, but happily without doing much harm to our troops.

We relieved a Section which was holding four positions on the banks of the river on the evening of the 28th January. Two of these were in Nervesa, at which place our Division joined up with the 7th Division. The third position was some four hundred yards further to the right, the gun platform being on the shingle in front of the embankment, while a sand-bag bivouac for the use of the team was built a few yards away between the embankment and a thick stone wall which ran in front of it for a short way forming a narrow but deep gangway from the roadway above down to the river. This was the post which my team took over. The fourth position was close to the blown-up bridge which had at one time spanned the River Piave. The trenches by the river between our position and Nervesa were usually shelled by the Austrians for about half-an-hour each morning, and this was practically the only sign the enemy showed of his positions on the far side of the river.

Although British troops had now been in Italy for over two months our ration of bread was still very small, and each day one of us would take a walk down the trench into Nervesa, where we were able to buy biscuits and tinned food at the canteen of the Gordon Highlanders. This canteen was in one of the capacious rooms of a large mansion in the centre of the town which was being used for Headquarters by this Battalion of Infantry. It was a magnificent building, but like all the rest of the houses and public buildings it had been considerably damaged by shell fire.

The River Piave in many places was almost dried up, but by the town of Nervesa and for some distance to the right of my team's post the water was fairly deep and ran

very swiftly. Numerous attempts were made by our men to cross the river where the water was deep either on rafts or by swimming. One attempt to swim across was made at our gun position by an officer and several men early one night, but owing to the very swift current and the icy coldness of the water they had to give it up after being in the water only a few seconds.

On the night of the 1st February the whole of the 13th Infantry Brigade was relieved and went back into rest billets in the numerous villages in the rear for a period of twelve days. In the afternoon of February 13th the Brigade took over the extreme right sector of that part of the line held by British troops which was a mile or two to the right of where we had spent our first eight days on the Piave front. On going into the trenches this time I had to take over the work of Company runner, and therefore I remained at Company Headquarters, which was in a house about half-a-mile from the river. The four guns of my Section were again distributed along the river embankment, the right hand gun being just inside the trench where the Italian soldiers linked up with us. Two days after taking over this sector we removed our Headquarters into another house, situated about two hundred and fifty yards beyond the village of Spresiano, on the main road which led to the damaged bridge over the river. The first afternoon we spent here the road from our Headquarters to the church at the edge of the village was very heavily shelled by the Austrians. Our house was in a direct line with the enemy's fire, and many shells which fell short dropped just behind the building, whilst others just cleared the roof and burst not more than ten yards in front of the doorway. Having no other place of refuge the C.O. and the half-a-dozen men stationed here collected round the door and watched the effect of the bursting fusilade of explosives. Every afternoon after this bombardment the enemy would hurl a number of shells between our Headquarters and the village. This road was also frequently shelled in the early mornings, and on one occasion a small shell struck the base of the wall at the back of our home, but happily resulted in nothing worse than a number of bricks being blown into the kitchen, and rather a sudden awakening for the officers' cook who was sleeping on a table in the kitchen.

As runner I had to make several journeys each day to the various Sections, but chiefly to my own, with messages

and also in company with the C.O. The land close to the river was composed chiefly of gravel, which made it very difficult work to dig good trenches. If the sides were not rivetted they would all fall in with the least touch. The River Piave at this point of the line was practically non-existent, only the wide stretch of river bed with a few pools of water at infrequent intervals remaining of it.

A few days after we took over the positions in this sector a large fire could be seen burning away on the mountains behind the Austrian lines, and this continued to burn for several days and nights. This phenomenon high up on the mountain side on our left front attracted considerable attention at night time.

Since we came into the trenches for the second time each of our four Sections took turns in returning to the village of Povegliano for four days' rest. My Section went back to this village for our brief rest late in the afternoon of February 25th. While we were out of the line our only parade was P.T. at 9 a.m. each morning, and this always took the form of football, and usually continued until the cook called us to our "bully stew" and rice. On the third night of our sojourn from the line the whole Section had to proceed to the Piave embankment for the purpose of constructing a number of new gun positions on both sides of the broken bridge. The vicinity of this bridge was the only spot on our divisional front which was swept by the fire from Austrian machine guns. It was a dangerous place along which to work on the top, but by two o'clock in the morning our fatigue work was completed without sustaining any casualties. The first of March saw my Section once more in the trenches.

The weather was now exceptionally warm, and while in the trenches both officers and men moved about in the day time with tunics off.

Preparations were now being made for a big raid into the Austrian lines on the far side of the river. Our Engineers were busy each night building foot bridges across the various stretches of water which still remained in the river bed. This work caused our front line trench to be heavily shelled during the day time. During one of these bombardments the team on which I was No. 1 gunner, when not engaged as a runner, had a narrow escape. Several shells burst close to the position, and one landed on the roof of the shelter damaging it

considerably, but all the gunners escaped being wounded, although one had to be taken out of the line suffering from shell-shock. Innumerable batteries of artillery were being placed in position and thousands of shells brought into the line in readiness for this raid. We also made a dump of some 100,000 rounds of S.A.A. for the use of our sixteen machine guns. As the date on which this raid had been fixed to take place drew near anxious looks by all were cast over the wide and almost waterless river-bed, as we had been informed by the Italians that at this time of the year the River Piave usually became flooded by a tremendous rush of water from the mountains. In view of the fact that part of the scheme planned out by our Generals was to hold the enemy's positions on the far side of the River Piave for forty-eight hours the danger from the possible sudden rising of the river was considerably increased, for if this did occur while the raid was in progress we should all be caught like rats in a trap. Fate, however, ordained that this raid should not take place, for the Italians' warning about the sudden flooding of the river proved correct, and two nights before it was to be accomplished a rapid influx of water from the mountains washed away our footbridges and converted the almost dried up river into a raging torrent.

Since coming into the line on the 13th February, the Company had received a pay of ten or fifteen lire every ten or more days. It took the Officer who paid us the best part of one day to go to each of the twelve gun positions. Although we were in the firing line this small sum of money was very acceptable even if it only provided gambling money for a number of our comrades. About the same time as these pay days took place a limber was usually sent from the transport lines to Treviso for the purpose of getting a supply of goods for our canteen which was run at Company Headquarters for the benefit of the men in the unit.

A large number of German bombing machines were being employed on the Italian front causing a deal of havoc immediately behind the line. The village of Spresiano was bombed several times and on one occasion a signaller on the 13th Brigade Headquarters Staff was killed. Not being content with bombing immediately behind the trenches these Boche airmen one night dropped several on the river bank but without causing any damage other than blowing a lot of

barbed wire lying at the foot of the embarkment right on to the top.

During the second week in March news came to hand that the Fifth Division was soon to be relieved by the Italians. It was in the afternoon of March 15th that the Italian troops commenced to come into the line. The twelve machine gun posts which we were holding were all taken over by Italian gunners, but none of our men left the trenches until the following afternoon. Our Italian ally manned the trenches with considerably more men than is the custom with the British, and during the last twenty-four hours that we were in the line it was almost impossible to walk down the trenches. The first night that they were in the line along with our men one was killed and several wounded. To dispense with the heavy labour entailed in removing all our reserve ammunition, this, to the extent of several thousand rounds which was kept at each gun position, was fired into the enemy's lines. This heavy firing from our machine guns greatly perturbed the Italian troops, as also had our artillery which from the date that we first came to the Piave battle front had been bombarding the Austrian defences incessantly. By the evening of the 16th the whole of the Fifth Division was out of the line and resting in billets in Povegliano and neighbouring villages prior to marching away to billets further in the rear.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### RECALLED TO FRANCE.

ON the morning of the 18th March we commenced a series of daily marches with rests of one or more days after about every third day's march. It was during this migration from the firing line that we learned of the Great German Advance on the French front, and the official wireless news which was daily posted outside the Orderly Room was read with considerable animation. We arrived at our destination, a village called Bevadora, on the 26th March, and here we expected to remain for some little time. On the second day of our stay in this village a Brigade marching competition took place, fifty men and two officers from each of the four infantry battalions and the 13th Machine Gun Company being the competitors. This competition had originally been arranged to take place last January, but

owing to the Division receiving orders to move into the line it had been indefinitely postponed. The march, which was over a distance of some eight miles, had to be accomplished under strict march discipline, in a stated length of time, and in infantry heavy marching order, while judges were posted at frequent intervals along the route to be traversed. As many of us who were to represent the 13th M.G. Company did not possess rifle equipment a deal of borrowing of rifles and suitable equipment from the men who possessed it, but who had not been selected for the march, had to be done. As each of the marching parties reached the finishing point they had to line up in a field to be inspected by the judges and a number of Italian Staff officers. At this inspection several men from each of the squads had to take off their boots and socks, whilst every officer and man had to take off his pack and lay the contents out on the grass. It was at this stage of the inspection that we machine gunners lost a number of points, as the officer in charge of us on emptying his pack revealed, to our dismay, two blankets in lieu of an infantryman's full service kit. The two prizes, a pig and a barrel of beer, were won by the 1st Battn. Royal West Kents and the 1st K.O.S.B.

During our stay in this village the daily parades were very few which gave us ample opportunities of scouring the countryside and villages near by, and some of the men even paid a visit to the town of Padova, which was a number of miles distant. This life of tranquility came to a very abrupt termination, however.

On the evening of the last day in March, shortly after returning to our billet for the night, the most undreamed-of and disturbing of orders was read out to us. This order was for reveille at 6 a.m., blankets to be rolled in bundles of 10 by 6.15, breakfast at 6.45, and parade outside the billets at 8 o'clock in full marching order ready to march away to the station where the Company would entrain for the purpose of returning to the hard-pressed battle front in France. At reveille the next morning, April 1st, rain was pouring down like a sheet and did not abate one little bit by the time we had to be on parade, and before the whole Company was ready to march to the train we were all well on the way to being wet through. Luckily for us our train was in a siding off the roadside only about two miles away, so that this, our last march on Italian soil, was not of very long duration.

By mid-day we had commenced the long, tedious return journey to France.

The Fifth Division had been just four months in Italy, of which only two months had been spent in the trenches on the Piave front. This trip to Italy had been for many of us a much-needed rest after the nerve-racking ordeals and hardships through which the Fifth Division had passed during the Battle of the Somme, the winter campaign of 1916—17, the Battles of Vimy and Arras, and the fearful autumn offensive on Passchendaele Ridge. The return journey was much the same as the outward journey, with the exception that the stations along the Riviera were minus their enthusiastic crowds. On the 5th April we were passing once more through the north of France and the same evening our train was travelling only a few miles in the rear of the Amiens battlefield. News of the great enemy advance was eagerly solicited from the numerous parties of British Tommies whom we passed at the various wayside stations. We fully expected that we should have to detrain somewhere in this locality, but throughout the night our train jogged slowly along and it was not until mid-day on the 6th April that our destination was reached. Frevant was the name of the rail-head and from here we marched to a group of farm houses close to the village of Bougermaison, in the barns of which we were billeted. The Guards' Division had their Reinforcement Camp at Bougermaison, and on the second evening of our stay here several of us had the pleasure of listening to a concert given by members of the Guards. On the 9th we moved to some fresh billets a few miles away, but our stay here was of very short duration. At mid-day on the 10th orders were received to pack up ready for moving away at 2 o'clock. After a march of about five miles we came to a small country railway station, but it was not until late in the evening that we boarded a train which was to convey us to an unknown destination. News that the Germans had broken through the Armentiers front lead us to presume that we were destined for that area. We commenced the journey at dusk and at daybreak the next morning we arrived at Thiennes, a large village situated at the south-west corner of Nieppe Forest. This train journey had been accomplished under very crowded conditions and we were all very glad to get into the fields outside the station and stretch our legs. Although the German forces were presumed to be

in the vicinity, if not actually in the Forest of Nieppe, no signs of hostilities could either be seen or heard, but the long string of French refugees who were streaming down the Merville Road testified to the truth of the nearness of the advancing enemy. These refugees consisted of old men, women and children, and every one of them carried bundles containing what few possessions they had been able to save from the hands of the Huns. A few of the lucky ones who possessed a cart and a horse, or even a cow if they had no other draught animal, saved a considerable portion of their belongings, whilst a few were also driving cattle and pigs before them. We were very short of food supplies, having only what rations were left from the previous day, but, food or no food, orders to advance were received about mid-day. The Division was without any artillery support as this was still many miles in the rear, travelling by road. I did not move forward with my section as it had once more come round to my turn to remain in reserve at the transport lines. All the men's packs were placed in several heaps on the edge of the forest and myself and three comrades were left in charge of them. We had to remain here with our men's belongings until such time as they could be moved to the Rear Company Headquarters, which shortly after the gunners and the various infantry battalions had moved forward in search of the Boche, took possession of a farmstead at a place called Thanney, about three miles higher up on the outskirts of the south side of the forest. It was not until late the following afternoon that the men's baggage was taken off our hands, and we were at liberty to proceed to the barns in which our drivers and reserve party were being billeted.

Shortly after our return from Italy the command of No. 4 Section was taken over by 2nd Lieut. White; our Section Officer for the past two year, Lieut. Russell Bladon, having returned to England. Every man in the section was sorry to lose their old Section Commander, especially the three or four of us who had been associated with him since the Battle of the Somme. It had so happened that on several occasions when Lieut. Bladon was unable to accompany us into the line, heavy casualties and bad luck generally had been the lot of No. 4 Section. Most notable among his enforced absences was on the occasion of the catastrophe which befell the gunners of his section on that memorable day during the third battle of Ypres (October 4th, 1917),

when such of our old hands as Sergeant Humble, Corporals Speed and Crawford, Privates Ellis, Butler, Cruyer and many others became casualties. When we again went into action in "The Salient" at the beginning of November, 1917, accompanied by Lieut. Bladon, by some strange coincidence we suffered not a single casualty whilst holding our positions.

The reader will, therefore, not be surprised to learn that during his command it had become almost a superstition among us, that, if ever we proceeded into the line unaccompanied by him we were sure to have heavy and regrettable losses. Now that we were minus our "mascot" officer we all hoped that no unforeseen disaster would befall No. 4 Section during this first brush with the Germans after our long absence from the French Front.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

BARRING THE ROAD TO THE CHANNEL PORTS. ✕  
(NIEPPE FOREST, APRIL—JULY, 1918).

**W**HEN the 13th Infantry Brigade moved forward on the morning of the 11th April they did not come into contact with the German Forces until they were nearing the eastern corner of Nieppe Forest, at which point heavy machine gun fire was opened out upon them. The unit which suffered the most was the 14th Battn. Royal Warwickshire Regiment who lost many of their officers and a big percentage of the rank and file in killed and wounded. Two sections of my company had several men wounded from this machine gun fire. The work of searching the forest for any German troops who might have secreted themselves in its vast depths was undertaken by our Divisional Pioneer Battalion, the 6th Battn. Argyle & Sutherland Highlanders. From the morning of the 11th until late in the afternoon of the following day our infantry had to hold the Boche at bay without any artillery support. The Germans were also without artillery support, but by dawn on the 12th a considerable portion of theirs had got into position, and straightway began to bombard our lines. During this bombardment one of our officers and several men of No. 1 Section were wounded. By afternoon the Boche had got into position a heavy howitzer battery which was trained to fire on the Merville Road at a point about one mile above our transport lines, and after a few rounds had been fired the road was rendered al-

most impassable. This road, however, was soon sufficiently repaired to allow of our transports to proceed towards the line.

Our Divisional Artillery reached Thiennes on the afternoon of the 12th and the guns were immediately galloped into action a few hundred yards beyond our rear headquarters. Within a very short time of their first arriving at Thiennes after their long march our field guns were barking defiance to the enemy. When the Fifth Division was rushed to this part of the front we did not relieve another division, but stragglers of the 50th and 51st Divisions were met with at numerous points. These men lost no time in making their way to the rear. On the afternoon of the 13th April our C.O., Lieut. P. Watt, was killed while sitting in a house, by a piece of shell from one which burst in a house on the opposite side of the road. The splinter which caused his death passed through the window and hit him in the head, death being instantaneous. In the same house where the shell burst, were a number of signallers of the Warwickshire Regiment, but not one of these was hurt. Our dead C.O. was brought out of the line and taken to the Field Ambulance which was in a large farm building on the opposite side of the road to our transport lines, and was buried on the following morning in a field at the back. He was the first officer to be buried in this, the Thanney British Military Cemetery.

On the 15th April I had to go into the line and take up my abode at Company Headquarters as runner. During the next few days casualties followed one after the other in quick succession, including No. 3 Section officer killed, one of my section's old boy's killed, and one wounded.

My section had been in the front line some two or three hundred yards in front of the forest but returned to a support line inside the forest about the 19th April.

For the first few weeks after arriving on this front our men lived like lords while in the line. The numerous farms scattered round about were, of course, destitute of civilian population, but all the poultry and even pigs and cattle had been left behind, and, naturally so, these soon fell victims to the British Tommy to supply him with extra food. When our ration limbers came up at night they invariably took back with them what supplies we could scrounge from the various farmsteads and houses. At our Company Head-

quarters we lived on the fat of the land. Each night after us runners had returned from our long tramps to the various gun teams the two officers' servants who were at headquarters always had an appetizing supper awaiting us; this usually included roast fowl, baked potatoes and jam rolls. From a brewery in the deserted village of Haverskerque we could obtain as much beer as we required. So hurried had been the flight of the French inhabitants that many of them had left practically all their possessions, and the troops in reserve were frequently decking themselves out as civilians. During the first two weeks after the staying of the German advance a number of women with horses and carts plucked up courage to visit their old homes which were in the vicinity of our reserve line and took away many of their possessions.

Shell fire on both sides was now becoming very heavy and incessant. The cluster of houses, in one of which we had our headquarters, soon began to receive marked attention from the Boche gunners, and it was not long before 50 per cent. of the houses had been struck by shells. Our headquarters had several narrow escapes including two occasions when 5.9's burst not more than five yards from the front door. Some two hundred yards away was a cluster of farms in which were our Brigade Headquarters and the Advanced Dressing Station: these were also subjected to a heavy shell fire. Several transport wagons were struck here causing a number of casualties. The Dressing Station was eventually destroyed by direct hits, which set the thatched roofing on fire, while the Brigade Headquarters had to move into the forest. From the first day that the enemy got his guns in position the top end of Nieppe Forest immediately behind our front line trenches had been continuously shelled with gas shells making it at times almost untenable. All the tracks and roads leading through the forest to the front line were shelled at frequent intervals, and we runners used to have some unpleasant journeys.

On the night of the 23rd April the 13th Brigade was relieved from the front line, but only went into reserve, about one mile further back, where we had to make bivouacs for ourselves inside the forest. Of the six days that we were here the four sections of gunners had to spend three of them in the Divisional Reserve Trench. Several sections of this trench being in close proximity to numerous batteries of our

artillery were continually under very heavy shell fire, thereby giving our men very little opportunity of securing a much-needed rest. On the 26th April my section went into the Divisional line at a point called "Rue de Motte." This was a clearing in the forest with a row of cottages on one side, and on which the Germans daily practiced with their guns. From our rest camp to "Rue de Motte" it was at least three miles by the nearest route which was along the narrow footpaths leading through the heart of the forest. As Company Runner I had invariably to make this journey twice a day, morning and night. Light railways were now being rapidly laid through the forest for the purpose of conveying supplies to the trenches and ammunition for the numerous batteries of artillery which were now secreted in its depths, and occasionally I got a lift almost to my destination.

On the night of April 29th I rejoined my gun team prior to it moving up into the front line trench. That same night we took over an advanced position situated in a ditch-like trench running through a farm yard in which were a number of dead cattle, the work of the German artillery. We had to spend the remaining few hours of darkness in making a new gun position and in improving our shallow trench. Machine gun fire swept across our parapet all through the night, while showers of trench mortar bombs continually crashed upon the farm buildings immediately behind us. My duty with the gun team did not last very long, however, for on the following night my services as runner were again in demand. I had to return to a farm some six hundred yards behind the front line which was being used as headquarters by the Section in support. Each night the rations and trench stores for the sections in the fire and support trenches were brought to this farm and then carried by gunners from each of the gun teams to their respective positions. All messages for the section officers in the front line had to be delivered at night-time as we were under observation from the enemy's lines. As soon as it began to get dusk most of the roads and tracks leading into the front line were rendered hazardous by German machine gun fire and also by rapid whiz-bang fire. By using the roads and tracks, or walking straight across the fields, was the only means of getting from one line of trenches to another, as we had not resorted to the 1916 method of digging communi-

cation trenches. My section remained in the front line until the night of the 9th May when we were relieved and went into the Divisional Reserve Line on the south side of the forest, where we remained until the whole Company was relieved on the night of the 15th May. We went right out of the line to rest billets in Thiennes, which we reached in the early hours of the following morning. This was the first time that the Company had been out of the line since it detrained on the morning of April 11th. Rest and quietness, however, was not for the 13th Machine Gun Company, for at eight o'clock on the same morning that we arrived here a German long-range, high velocity gun, commenced to pitch its shells all round our billets. Only a few hours previous to my section taking over the billet we were occupying, one of these shells had burst in the gateway of the yard, blown down a stone pillar and killed a couple of goats. In another house about one hundred yards away several civilians had been killed, while numerous other houses had been hit. On the first day of our brief rest these shells continued to fall at the rate of one every few minutes until twelve o'clock.

During the five weeks that we had been in the firing line an important change in our formation had taken place. The four Machine Gun Companies attached to the 5th Division had all been amalgamated to form one Machine Gun Battalion numbered the 5th. The 13th Company was now known as "A" Company, 5th Machine Gun Battalion.

On the 21st May the Company again proceeded into the line, but during the first four days I remained at the reserve billet in Thanney. Early one morning this hamlet was heavily shelled by the enemy and several men belonging to a Labour Battalion, living under canvas just inside the forest, were fatally wounded. Two shells burst in a ditch against our barn and killed a horse which was grazing in the field at the back, while several small pieces of shrapnel penetrated through the mud wall of our billet and dropped on to one of the men's blankets. I joined my Section again on the 25th May in the Divisional Reserve Line, a little way inside the forest. Now that summer was upon us this Forest of Nieppe swarmed with myriads of mosquitos which made sleep almost impossible, especially at night time. Many of our men were most fearfully bitten about the face and neck. Sickness was now rife in the Division, mainly caused by our prolonged

periods of duty in the heart of a most unhealthy forest, and under the most trying conditions which were further aggravated by the gas shell bombardments which practically every day sprayed their poisonous contents into our wooded stronghold. It was about this time that one of the battalions of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment became so depleted in strength, while the survivors were all suffering more or less from either the effects of poisonous gases or fever that it had to be relieved from the front line trenches by our Divisional Pioneer Battalion.

My Section moved forward into the support line in front of the forest on the evening of the 27th May. From the edge of the forest to the positions we had to take over, heavy machine gun fire was encountered and one man was wounded. The four posts which we took over were situated in a kind of angle of the forest, one side of which was about 150 yards to the rear and parallel with our trench, and the other side ran at right angles on the left of the trench. This part of the line was subjected to a heavy shell fire practically every night and early mornings with sharp spasms during the day. Gas shells were numerous and our respirators had frequently to be brought into use. During the twelve days that we were in these positions a party of bombers raided a Boche machine gun post for which we fired a covering barrage from a section of the fire trench. Probably an hour elapsed before the enemy retaliated, but when he did his barrage of high explosive shells which was trained upon our positions almost lifted us out of the trench. We considered ourselves very lucky indeed when the bombardment was over to find that only one platform was damaged and our two sergeants buried, but none the worse for it. One morning all our four men on sentry duty by the guns were wounded by a heavy shrapnel shell which burst immediately overhead. We were relieved on the 8th June and after a few days' rest went into the support line in the vicinity of the Bourre River on the north side of the forest. My section had its guns in an orchard on the banks of the river, whilst adjoining it was a large potato field from which we nightly dug up sufficient new potatoes for the next day. Preparations were now being made for a local attack which was to take place on this front shortly. On several nights we were engaged in carrying boxes of ammunition into the front line in readiness for the fray. All through the night-time the Germans kept the air

literally alive with machine gun bullets, but only on one occasion did we have a man hit. This attack did not take place before we were once more relieved, as it had been temporarily postponed. During the few days that we were out of the line on this occasion I paid a visit to the dentist at Aire. Owing to such a great many cases being at the hospital at the time, I was away from my Company longer than was expected and during my absence they again went into the line, and the attack which had previously been postponed, took place on June 28th, the same day that I was attended to by the dentist. Before leaving Aire at mid-day I saw quite a stream of motor ambulances arrive with the wounded, and on the road back to Theinnes, motor-lorries full of slightly wounded men, passed by at frequent intervals. During this attack No. 3 Section of my Company had three men killed and several wounded, and each of the other sections also had a number of men wounded. I remained at the Company's transport lines in Thanney until the evening of June 30th. when I joined a depleted gun team of No. 3 Section, in the front line trench. It was in front of this trench that my own section officer was killed by a shell on the night following the attack. On the night of July 3rd No. 3 Section moved back into the old front line trench. Each night our rations were dumped by our transport inside an old farmstead called Taxi Farm, which, together with the adjoining lane, was a favourite target for the Boche whizz-bang batteries. In this lane two of the old boys of No. 4 Section were killed a few nights after the short advance.

On the 6th July I went to Company Headquarters which were situated just inside the forest, to take over my favourite occupation of Company Runner. The Company was relieved for its six days' rest on the night of July 14th. Our C. O. or the "Mad Major" as he was invariably called, and who had only just recently come to the Company, gave us all a real treat on the occasion of this relief. The light railway now ran from the village of Thiennes right through the heart of Nieppe Forest, and one branch of it terminated close to our Company Headquarters on the north-east edge of it. He had obtained permission for the whole company to be conveyed out of the line to our rest billets on this light railway, and by ten o'clock on the night of the relief an engine with a dozen or more trucks attached to it was waiting for its freight of gunners. This consideration saved us from

the usual long weary night march of about eight miles before gaining our rest billets.

On proceeding into the trenches again on the 20th July, we took over the machine gun posts situated in the front line and support trenches, from a point extending several hundred yards south of the forest, and immediately in front of the south-east corner of it. I again had to take on the duties of runner, and took up my abode at Company Headquarters. "A" Company's Headquarters were in a house situated close to the edge of the forest where it was so securely screened from the eyes of the enemy, that for over three months it had stood amid an almost continuous shell fire, but up to the present it had miraculously escaped being hit by a single shell, although practically every other building from the front line trenches to a distance of over two miles behind had long since been razed to the ground. It was a nice looking red-bricked house standing on the side of a road at the point where it entered the forest, and on the front wall was a large board on which was painted in large letters the name of this house; "The Doll's House."

From the Doll's House to the front line trenches, the forest was bordered with fields of potatoes and green peas and almost daily our dinner consisted of these two vegetables. Many bags of potatoes were also loaded on our ration limbers at night time to be taken down to the transport lines.

The Section of the Divisional Reserve Line which ran through one of the potato fields in front of our headquarters was one afternoon heavily shelled by the Boche Artillery, and several gun teams of our "C" Company sustained serious losses. They included one killed and four or five men very dangerously wounded. The Advanced R.A.M.C. Dressing Station was luckily just inside the forest and stretchers were soon brought to the scene. By giving our assistance to the stretcher bearers we very soon had all the wounded men carried to the Dressing Station, and within a very short time of receiving their wounds the men were speeding on their way to the rear Field Ambulance via the light railway.

Casualties in the Infantry Battalions and our Machine Gun Battalion were numerous, many of which were caused by machine gun fire at night time. Our artillery in the fields, orchards and the forest away further to the rear were having some very rough half-hours at the hands of the German

gunners. On one occasion every officer and a great majority of the gunners of one battery were either killed, wounded or gassed. The most common form of casualty among the artillery men on this sector was gas poisoning, which also rendered many of the victims temporarily blind.

On the night of August 1st my Company was relieved from the front line and support trenches and took over the Reserve gun positions in the Divisional line, while Headquarters moved into the battered village of Haverskergue. Before our men could get away each of us Runners had to guide a section of the relieving Company to our respective Section. This Company had brought their guns and gun equipment on pack mules, which made progress to my Section very slow indeed, as I had to guide them through the forest along a narrow footpath which was rendered more difficult to travel along owing to it being night time. By the time the head of our calvacade had reached the Headquarters of the Battalion of Infantry which was holding the front line trench the last mule and party of men were several hundred yards in the rear. Arriving at this point the guns were unstrapped from the backs of the mules, as this was as far as we could proceed with them, and for the remainder of the journey the heavy loads had to be carried by hand. We were now close to the outskirts of the forest, and on resuming the trek we found the path was being heavily assailed by Boche machine gun fire, which was clipping off whole showers of twigs before embedding themselves in the tree trunks or the ground at our feet. On gaining the open country we were faced with even heavier machine gun fire. More than one bullet passed perilously close to my face, and I fully expected that a number of us would be hit. Only one man, however, was wounded, and he was conveyed by two of his comrades to a rear Aid Post. We presently arrived at the trench in which my Section had their guns, and the four gun teams lost no time in handing over their posts to the relief. I now had to guide my own Section to the reserve positions which they had to take over. Until the Doll's House had been reached on our journey back to the Reserve very little enemy shell fire had taken place, but the last half-mile before reaching the reserve positions happened to be heavily shelled just as we were traversing it. Clusters of ruined houses on two different cross roads were the most dangerous points which we had to pass. The first one was passed quite easily, although

we were half choked by the fumes and gasses from the bursting shells. At the second one 5.9's, which were crashing into the roadway, scattered us all right and left, but fortunately without inflicting any casualties. Our officer was now getting impatient to reach the positions, and asked me how much further they were, and as I indicated a gateway not more than twenty-five yards away other two or three heavy shells tore up the roadway at the very spot. When my Section was at last installed in their positions I took a short cut across the fields to our new Headquarters in the village of Haverskerque. They were in the capacious cellars of a large house close to the church, and, characteristically of the German bombardments, were continually under shell fire. On the pathway leading through the garden to the house was a battery of 18-pounders, which kept up a constant fire on some particular sector of the Boche line every night.

The 5th Division was finally relieved from this part of the line on the night of August 7th. As soon as our Battalion was relieved we marched to some farms a little way beyond Thiennes, where we were to rest for one day before proceeding further to the rear of the firing line.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### OPENING DAYS OF THE "GRAND ALLIED OFFENSIVE," AUGUST, 1918.

**T**HE four Companies of the 5th Machine Gun Battalion were now all brought together for the first time since the Battalion was formed four months ago. On the 8th August we moved to another village in the direction of St. Omar, where we stayed until the evening of the 15th, on which date we marched to St. Omar. This town was frequently visited by the German Bombing Squadrons, and this night was not an exception. For a considerable distance before we reached the town bombs were bursting in quick succession a few hundred yards on either side of the road, and just before reaching the town a number dropped considerably nearer, and as the enemy's 'planes flew past immediately overhead several were caught in the glare of a score or more of our searchlights, giving our "Archie" Gunners an opportunity of showing their skill. None were brought down, however, and they continued steadily on their mission of destruction dropping an occasional bomb here and there.

Arriving at the station of St. Omar we straightway commenced to board a waiting train, and after an all-night journey we de-trained on the morning of the 16th August at Frevent. We did not remain in this town very long, but during the three days that we did stay here we were kept fully occupied with inspections, which entailed much scrubbing and polishing of equipment. About 7 o'clock on the evening of the 18th we received a lightning order to pack up and be ready to move away at 8.30. Most of the men were in the town, and the few who were in the billets at the time had to search the streets and call us all in. It was after 9 o'clock before we were ready to march off. Many other units were also on the move, and progress along the dark country roads was slow. We reached Doullens in the early hours of the morning, and the whole of the 13th Infantry Brigade was accommodated within the gates of the citadel. Late on the evening of the 19th found our Brigade once more on the move. This second night march was a very long one, and after marching for over five hours not a few of us dropped fast asleep during each hour's ten minutes' rest, while a few even went to sleep on the march. It was daylight before we reached our destination—an encampment of newly-erected huts on the roadside. We were now within a few miles of the battle front, and after securing several hours' sleep we made our final preparations for the strife. At dusk our third and last night march was commenced. This was undertaken in "Battle Order" dress, our packs having been left behind, and soon after passing through the shattered village of Fonqueville we had to remove our soft hats and wear our tin ones. The 13th Brigade was in reserve for the present, and a little way beyond the village of Gommécour we halted at a network of reserve trenches, in which we had to stay for the time being. On the following morning, August 21st, the Third British Army, to which we belonged, joined in the Grand Allied Offensive, which was already in progress further to the south. For the next three days my Brigade had nothing to do but rest in our trenches and await our turn to join in the advance. The 5th Division was operating in the vicinity of Achiet-le-Grand and Achiet-le-Petit in conjunction with the New Zealanders and the 37th Division.

On the 23rd August the 13th Infantry Brigade received orders to be ready to move forward, and at 3 o'clock in the afternoon we commenced the tramp to the front line. The large

village of Bucquoy, some two and a half miles in front of Gommécour, through which we had to pass, was being heavily shelled, and in spite of the fact that the roads were simply choked with slow moving tanks, transports and troops moving forward, no casualties appeared to be inflicted. Beyond this village we left the roadway and struck across country, and when still about a mile from the front line we received orders to rest in the trenches which were in the vicinity. Half-an-hour later we moved forward to the shelter of a high bank under which we commenced to unload our guns from the limbers. While the unloading was in progress the Germans commenced to shell the neighbourhood and several parties of Infantrymen who were resting in shell-holes close by were wounded. Our Battalion Colonel presently came up to us on horseback and had a short conversation with our Section Officer and a number of Officers of the 1st Battalion Royal West Kent Regiment, but before moving away he wished his men the best of luck. We had not been informed what the work before us was, but when our Colonel shouted this out to us we concluded that we were destined for "over the top." A little later we commenced moving forward, in company with the Royal West Kents, across the railway south of Achiet-le-Grand. In open formation we advanced towards the front line positions, but on reaching them we pushed further ahead towards the Boche lines, leaving our front line garrison in our rear. We had not advanced many yards in the direction of the enemy before the bullets from his machine guns were kicking up little clouds of dust at our feet, while his artillery was placing a heavy barrage of shells in the vicinity of the railway over which we had recently crossed. Several hundred yards beyond our old front line my Section took a brief halt in a shallow ditch. Shortly after gaining this point a large batch of German Infantrymen, coming over to give themselves up as prisoners, narrowly escaped a reception from our machine guns, as at first sight we took them for a counter-attacking force. Before advancing further we each had a tot of rum from a petrol tin, in which we had our allowance, while the remainder was poured into two water-bottles, one of which was taken by our Sergeant and the second by myself. By dusk we were safely installed in a trench dug on the crest of a hill a little way to the right of Achiet-le-Grand. We had been very fortunate to advance this far without sustaining a single casualty. Our advanced

infantry outposts were some two to three hundred yards in front of us, and our Sergeant suggested taking two of the teams alongside of them. As I was Runner for my Section, I accompanied these two teams to their new posts. On reaching the scattered infantry outposts, the Sergeant, one gunner and myself went still further forward on a patrolling expedition in an effort to locate the whereabouts of the German troops. After cautiously prowling across the open fields and hedgerows immediately in front of us we returned with the satisfaction of knowing that the nearest Boche was at least 100 yards away. With a gunner from one of the gun teams for company, I now made my way back to the Officer with the intention of guiding the remainder of the Section to these outposts. The night was now as dark as pitch, and it was not at all an easy matter re-tracing one's steps across an uncertain countryside, with German machine gun bullets whizzing by at almost every stride. On arriving at the dug-out in which our Officer had taken up his abode, I was given instructions to return to the Sergeant immediately with the order that he had to return with the two teams at once; to have our guns well advanced did not suit the Battalion Commander, with whose men we were co-operating. Making my way back to the Sergeant, I delivered my message, which was received by that individual and the two gun teams with anything but pleasure. We made the return journey quite leisurely, stopping several times on the way to explore German dugouts and a vacated dressing station which we came across in a sunken road over which we had to pass. Daybreak was just beginning to assert itself by the time we dropped into the trench in which our Section had their positions. All the gunners, with the exception of those on sentry, were soon able to secure a few hours' sleep, but not so the Section Runner, for I was required to convey a message from my Officer to Company Headquarters. As I passed the several men on sentry duty each one had a greeting or some jocular remark to say, such as, "Good morning, Toby; going for a constitutional? Old Jerry's got you spotted already!" This last one evidently referred to the whizz-bangs which were bursting in quick succession not very far away and in the same direction as I was walking. My Company's Headquarters were situated close to those of the 13th Brigade, in an old trench where German dugouts were deep and plentiful and about two miles to the rear of the front line positions.

Since three o'clock the previous afternoon I had been continuously on my feet, while the only refreshment which I had had was a tot of rum the previous evening, and by the time that I came within sight of my destination I was all but dead beat. I reached the trench a little way from the Headquarters where some men of the 16th Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment were lying in reserve, and on half stumbling in they eagerly supplied me with some tea and rum and a chunk of bread, thickly smeared with "plum and apple" jam. As soon as I had eaten this impromptu breakfast and given my benefactors all the latest news of the advance, I continued on my way feeling considerably refreshed. Ten minutes later I had delivered my message, and while the C.O. was reading the contents and drafting out another one for me to take back, I sat down in the trench and tackled a second breakfast, consisting of fried bacon and bread, passed to me by the Signallers. About one hour later, and in company with another Runner, I set off on the return journey to my Section. Before leaving, the C.O. informed me that I should in all probability find that my Section and the Infantry Battalion to which we were attached had advanced again during my absence. On reaching the trench in which I had left them I found them still in occupation, but prepared to leave at short notice. It was now close on mid-day, so, after partaking of some dinner of warmed tinned vegetables, I went into the dugout to secure a much-needed rest. This rest, however, was of very short duration, for at 1.30 in the afternoon we received orders to move forward again.

The battle front of the 3rd Army now presented a most stupendous picture, a fine panorama view of which we secured from the top of the rising ground on which the trench we had been manning was situated. Before moving forward we had to await the arrival of our gun limbers, but the exhilarating effect of the unique sight of this grand general advance made us all impatient to join the advancing throng of British Tommies. The entire countryside for some two miles in front of our front line of the previous night was dotted with innumerable strings of soldiers moving up in single file, while away in our rear all the roads were thronged with transport wagons following slowly in our wake. Our artillery had not yet pulled out, but were still firing at their extreme range on the quickly retreating Boche. The Germans on their part were throwing heavy long-range shells in a frantic effort to

allay our victorious march. Our Brigade, the 18th, swerved forward to the left, coming to a halt at the village of Bihucourt. Here we came under a heavy fire from the enemy's long-range guns, and were forced to fall back several hundred yards. We were now in the rear of the 37th Division, one of whose Brigades we would relieve during the coming night. For the next six or more hours we had to pass the time sitting in the shell-holes and secure what little rest we could. Our artillery was now pulling out of their old positions, and while resting here we had the pleasure of witnessing several batteries of field artillery gallop past us and pull their guns into action again about fifty to one hundred yards in front of us. Several of the batteries had to get their guns into position under a withering shell fire, but they stuck heroically at their work, and in a very short time they were once more pouring a rapid shower of shells into the German lines. At dusk the enemy launched a counter-attack, and as soon as our "S.O.S." was seen to soar into the black sky from our front line positions, hundreds of voices belonging to men of the 13th Infantry Brigade cried out in chorus to our Artillerymen, by whom we were now almost surrounded. Our gallant gunners were not behind time, and in a fraction of a minute a tremendous storm of shells were tearing through the air to the relief of the hard-pressed Infantrymen in our first line of defence. Soon after night had fallen it commenced to rain very heavily, making our earthy seats in the shell-holes very wet and muddy, and we were glad when orders were received at ten o'clock to get ready to move into the line. Our Machine Gun Company shortly after setting out on this night march was brought to a dead halt when half-way through Bihucourt. This village was under heavy shell fire from the German guns, and a number of large trees had been blown across the road, effectively barring our limbers from proceeding any further by this road. The whole Company had to turn about and return almost to the starting point again with Boche 5.9 shells bursting at our heels. When we had got out of our unpleasant predicament, we made a second attempt, this time skirting the edge of the village and gaining the road at a point beyond it. We continued down this road unmolested by further shell fire until we reached another village called Biefvillers, and the remainder of our way from here to a high stone cliff about one mile further ahead had to be accomplished under a most harrassing whizz-bang fire.

All went well, however, until we came to the cliff and commenced to unload our guns, when all of a sudden we became enveloped in a whirlwind of heavy shell fire. The gun limbers were instantly drawn close under the shelter of the bank, while us gunners scrambled on to the numerous ledges cut out in the rock. Quickly as this precaution was taken, one of the enemy's shells caught one of the mules before it reached the sheltering bank, killing it on the spot, but the driver miraculously escaped being hit. Most of the shells contained poisonous gas, and respirators had to be worn for some little time. As soon as the bombardment had abated we lost no time in picking up our guns, and quickly made our way to the support trench in which my Section had to mount its guns. On reaching this, our final destination, we discovered that three of our men were missing, and I, the Section Runner, had to go back over the ground we had just covered. I saw no trace of them, but shortly after returning two of them turned up. The third man had been killed by a shell while they were taking shelter in an old trench.

This last advance had brought our line to the outskirts of Bapaume, and the 13th Infantry Brigade was about one mile to the left of it in the vicinity of Favreuil village and the wood of the same name. My Section was now in support close to the village of Sapagnies, some one thousand yards behind the front line. It was daylight by the time our four guns were in positions, and as soon as the Officer had written out his report I had to go out in quest of Company Headquarters. To find out the whereabouts of our C.O. and his staff was no easy matter. I set out shortly after seven o'clock and after searching every likely spot in Bihucourt and the surrounding country for four hours without finding them, I began to think that they had disappeared altogether. The three other Companies of the 5th Battalion I could find without difficulty, but inquiries at both Brigade and Divisional Headquarters as to the location of "A" Company were futile. It was nearly mid-day when, at last, my search proved successful. The C.O. himself told me that they had been all the morning themselves in finding this sunken road where they had now established their Headquarters. The point where my Section was now in position was about one and a half miles in front of Headquarters, and I went back much quicker than it had taken me to locate the latter. After rejoining the Section and delivering my message

from the C.O. we had straightway to pack up and move into another trench a little way further back.

For the next three days my Section remained in reserve, during which time I made up for the many hours' rest I had lost since coming into the line on August 23rd.

On the evening of the 28th of August we again moved forward into the front line to relieve our No. 3 Section in front of Favreuil Wood. Since the last advance on the 24th the enemy had maintained a heavy shell fire on our lines, and from our reserve positions to the front line the tracks were littered with many dead Tommies and horses. Just as we were approaching the front line we were caught in a heavy bombardment, and in which No. 3 Section Runner and two of my Section were killed and one wounded. Two of the posts which we took over were only thirty yards from the German trench. That night I made two trips to the four positions from our officer's headquarters, which was in a sunken road close to Favreuil Wood and about five hundred yards behind the front line. In addition to the men we had had killed while taking over these positions, three men were suffering from severe shock and soon after daybreak I escorted them down to Battalion Headquarters, where they were to rest for a few days. The following night our positions were again heavily shelled, especially in the vicinity of Favreuil and the road where my Section Officer, his servant and myself were staying.

On the 30th August I had to leave the Section and report for duty at Company Headquarters. The following day the British line was again advanced, and was now some way beyond Bapaume, which town had been occupied by the New Zealanders on the 29th August. That same night the whole of my Company came out of the front line into reserve for four days. When the time came for us to move into the line again we had a march of about seven miles to some old German huts a little way beyond the village of Beugny. It was close to this village that several gun teams of one of our Companies had been surprised by an enemy raiding party, and nearly all the gunners either killed or taken prisoners. Although we had only just moved into the line we were to be relieved by the 37th Division that same night. Early on the morning of the 5th September my Company was back in the vicinity of Bihucourt, and in the afternoon moved nearer to

the village of Achiet-le-Grand, where we were to stay for our rest of ten days.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### THE FINAL VICTORIOUS ASSAULTS.

**D**URING the last two weeks that we had spent in the firing line leave had been proceeding at a fairly brisk rate, and when we came out for this rest I learned that I was the next man on the Battalion roll to go. But on the expiration of our Divisional rest I was still waiting, no more men having been sent to Blighty since we came out, and it looked as though I should have to make another trip to the trenches. In the early afternoon of September 14th we again marched towards the line. While we had been out at rest the line had been still further advanced, and a march of over twelve miles brought us to the Headquarters of the New Zealanders in the village of Ytrès, some three miles behind the front line. We were to relieve the New Zealanders on the following day beyond Metz at the south corner of Havincourt Wood, where the Colonials were holding the Germans at bay. On arriving in Ytrès we were billeted in some huts in which we were to stay the night. Soon after daybreak on the following morning the Germans commenced to throw a number of long range shells into the village. Most of them did very little damage but one dropped on the hut in which our officers were sleeping killing one of them and slightly wounding a second. After breakfast a corporal, who was also waiting to go on leave, and myself had to go down to Battalion Headquarters, near Bihucourt, for one of our men who had deserted from the company in August. At Battalion H.Q. however, we were informed that he was still in detention at Etaples, so in the afternoon we took train at Achiet-le-Grand for the purpose of bringing the prisoner back. We arrived back with our man on the morning of September 19th, and after taking him to Battalion Headquarters, which had now been moved up to a village called Villers-au-Floss, the corporal and myself proceeded to our Company's Transport lines which were some two miles distant and nearer to the line. Here I met an old friend of mine, a member of my own Section, but who had been attached to No. 1 Section ever since we first came into action in August. From him I learned of

the misfortune which had befallen No. 1 Section while going into the trenches in the afternoon of the 15th September. While proceeding along the road by the edge of Havrincourt-Wood they were caught by the German heavy artillery, and about 50 per cent. of their number were either killed or wounded as also were the mules which were pulling the gun-limber. My friend very fortunately received nothing worse than a cut on the back of his head, his steel helmet having saved him from more serious harm.

The following day, September 20th I received my leave money of 100 francs, and left to join our "B" Echelon camp at Achiet-le-Grand. I was to have left for Blighty the next morning, but late that night a runner came down from Battalion Headquarters with a message postponing my leave pending the trial of the deserter. This embargo was removed, however, on the night of the 22nd and on the morning of the 23rd September I boarded a leave train at Achiet-le-Grand arriving in Bologne early on the 24th. I crossed the Channel during the afternoon, and quite early in the evening was once more on the busy platforms in Victoria Station. The morning of the 25th September saw me again in my native town, where my leave of fourteen days was spent in peace and quiet. My leave expired all too soon, and before midday on the 8th October I was back on French soil. On the night of the 10th after a long and tedious train journey I arrived at the village of Bus, where I stayed until morning before proceeding further. Several others of the 5th Machine Gun Battalion were also making the return journey and the remainder of the way we made in company. During my two weeks absence from the battle-front the Germans had again been pushed back a considerable distance. By clambering into a motor-lorry which was proceeding towards the line our little trio was close in the wake of our advancing army early in the afternoon. We were unable to find our Division that night so we commandeered an empty house in the village of Esnes which was some sixteen or more miles from the village at which we had detrained the night before. Resuming our search the next day, October 12th, we came across our Battalion Headquarters staff on the march. We marched with them to their new Headquarters in the town of Caudry, and there rejoined our own company. My Company had only moved into the line that morning, and I had missed accompanying them by about two hours.

The 5th Division was now in action on the banks of the River Selle between Briastre and Neuville.

On reporting back at my Company's Transport lines I had not to rejoin my Section in the trenches as I had anticipated but instead I had to proceed back to Battalion Headquarters to take over the duties of one of the runners who was going on leave. This was a nice cushy job to take up just coming back off leave. I had to make frequent journeys to the villages of Inchy and Bethencourt where part of the Battalion was in reserve, and occasionally to the companies holding the front line positions.

In the town of Caudry, and in practically every small village, were to be seen large numbers of civilians, chiefly women and children, who instead of leaving their homes during the German retreat, had secreted themselves in their cellars, until the dangers from shells and bullets had passed by. Caudry was nearly five miles from the German lines, but was not out of range of gun-fire, and many shells were fired into the town daily.

During the first few days after I arrived back from Blighty my Section had quite a number of casualties, including among those killed the Section runner and officer's servant.

The runner was the man who had taken over the duties from me when I left to go on leave.

Late on the night of the 18th October, and in a heavy downpour of rain our Battalion Headquarters, together with the 5th Divisional Headquarters, moved forward to a large chateau close to the front line positions. The Headquarters' personnel had a damp bed underneath the limbers that night with horse rugs and limber covers as blankets.

In the afternoon of the 22nd we moved our headquarters into Briastre, a small town on the river Selle in readiness for the grand attack which was to take place in the early hours of the following morning. The front line was now on the high ground beyond the river. All day the enemy's positions were severely pounded by our artillery to prepare the way for our infantry. The Boche artillery was also very active and in Briastre dozens of houses were destroyed by heavy shells, and we would not have been in the least surprised if the one we were occupying had suffered the same fate. Our front line and support positions were also heavily shelled and heavy casualties were inflicted upon the troops

holding the line. The attack commenced at 1.30 on the morning of the 23rd October, it attaining success all along the line. For a short time the German bombardment was very heavy but as the advance proceeded it quickly slackened down. The 5th Division carried its front forward to beyond Beaurain, but the following day we were relieved and the advance was taken up by another division.

We returned to the town of Caudry where we rested for the next twelve days.

The large tract of country which had recently been wrested from the Germans was at present far from being a safe district to live in. Almost every main cross-road and all bridges, and even many houses, had been carefully mined by the retreating enemy. Many of them were timed, while others would go off as soon as the spring or catch which actuated the explosives was touched.

On the last day of our stay in Caudry the railway bridge which spanned the main road suddenly blew up burying a G. S. supply wagon which happened to be passing underneath at the time. My Company was marching towards the bridge at the time and was only about one hundred yards distant when the explosion occurred. These mines were the cause of many casualties amongst our troops.

The day before the Division was to move forward again I returned to my old Section companions once more.

Of the original section of gunners whom I left in September when going on leave only seven or eight remained, all the others being new arrivals fresh from England.

At dusk on the night of the 5th November we marched from Caudry in the direction of the now far advanced battle line. It was a very dark night and the roads being inches deep with thick greasy mud, were in a fearful condition for marching along. In the early hours of the morning we reached a small village close in rear of our firing line, and here we had to rest in barns until further orders. Late that afternoon we were on the move again, and after marching another few miles we again halted for the night at some broken down buildings on the road side. On the following day, November 7th, we resumed our march and arrived at the village of Jolimetz early in the afternoon. We were now on the outskirts of Mormal Forest and only a mile or two from the fleeing Boche. All through the night long range shells kept falling in and about the village, but apparently

doing little damage. Continuing the pursuit on the 8th November we marched right through the heart of the Forest of Mormal emerging on the eastern side, and passing through Ponte-sur-Sambre we entered a large farm building about one mile beyond. The road through the forest had been very difficult and we were all very glad to rest ourselves on the straw which we found in our haven. Many heavy shells were bursting on the roadway which ran past our billet, and just as we arrived one of them killed our Divisional Intelligence Officer. These shells were destined to be the last I should see burst in "The Great War." At dusk we moved into the line and took up positions in front of the village of Limont-Fontaine. This village was full of civilians and a light was burning in almost every house. What a contrast to the front line positions of a few weeks ago, when even the faintest glimmer of a light would have resulted in a sharp bombardment from the German Guns. The enemy's artillery, however, was now being rapidly drawn out of the reach of the Victorious Allied Armies, and on this particular front artillery fire was practically nil.

During the early part of the night the Boche maintained a heavy machine gun fire on our outposts, but not a single shell was fired all night. My Section was in support and the gunners went into a barn full of straw where they could rest, and yet be at hand if their services were required.

I had taken over my old post as Section runner, and was about most of the night. In the early hours of the morning a heavy mist settled over the fields completely obscuring the view. Under cover of this natural curtain the German Rearguard troops made an effective and silent retreat. As soon as the enemy evacuation was spotted patrols were sent out but no trace of the Boche could be seen. During the morning the Fifth Division again took up the pursuit but shortly after midday orders were received for the Division to withdraw from the line. The battle front was now getting shorter with each advance, and at various points along the line some of our divisions had to fall behind owing to their fronts being crossed by the divisions on their flanks. This was what had occurred on our Divisional front. Part of the Division came to a halt in the village of Beaufort, but two battalions of infantry and two sections of our gunners who were in advance of the rest of the Division marched forward about ten miles further, before mounted orderlies

reached them with orders to fall back. Thus in the afternoon of the 9th November, practically the whole of the 5th Division was out of action, and on the following day we received the almost unbelievable news that we were out of action for good and all. All day on the 10th November a large pond close by the farm in which my Company was billeted was besieged with troops engaged in washing down transport limbers to remove the thick coating of mud with which all our transport vehicles were covered. Our two advanced sections did not join us until the morning of the 11th, "Armistice Day," and on their arrival we straightway commenced the return journey through the Mormal Forest arriving at a small village on the opposite side about four o'clock in the afternoon. The roads through this forest were shoetop deep in thick mud, and the company was not at all in high spirits by the time we reached our destination but more so were the two sections who only joined us at Beaufort in the morning after a long march and had had to commence this one without a rest. "La Guerre fini" was the cry with which the French people whom we passed on the way greeted us, but as yet we could hardly believe the news, and more than a few of our men could not believe but what we should be going into the line again at very short notice.

On reaching our destination, however, our doubts were set at rest when a special order officially informing us of the Armistice was read out to us. We were now all more or less elated, but, unlike many of our more fortunate comrades in arms, there was no possible way of celebrating this great and long wished for event other than over a cup of French coffee made without either milk or sugar.

## CHAPTER XXX

### THE ARMISTICE.

THE evening of "Armistice Day" saw me trudging along the dark country roads in the direction of the town of Le Quesnoy where I was to rejoin Battalion Headquarters for duty. I received my orders to leave for this town shortly after reaching the end of our weary march through Mormal Forest, and this additional tramp of some ten miles in heavy marching order, plus blankets, was not how I expected I should have to spend the first evening after the cessation of hostilities. Soon after setting out

on my lonesome journey a steady fall of rain set in, making my walk none the more pleasant. After about three hours steady tramping I came at last to the old fortified town of Le Quesnoy, which not many days ago had been in the hands of the Germans, from whom it had been captured by storm by our New Zealand troops. The streets were very dark indeed, and after traversing innumerable numbers of them and enquiring of every Tommy I came across in a vain search for the 5th Machine Gun Battalion I made my way as a last resource for the Town Major's Office.

Here I was informed in which street my battalion had their Headquarters, but as the officer could not direct me to that particular street I was practically in the same plight as before. It was useless trying to find the street in the dark as no one appeared to know them by their names so the officer gave me leave to spend the night in an empty room on the top storey.

Early next morning, after a most substantial breakfast obtained from the cook employed on the premises for the convenience of the Town Major's Staff, I set out once more to find the Headquarters of my Battalion. It was quite an easy matter to find them in daylight, and in less than ten minutes from leaving the Town Major's Office I had reported to the R.S.M.

On the following day, November 13th, Battalion Headquarters moved from Le Quesnoy to the village of Jolimetz, as also did the four companies which had been billeted in the outlying villages. The billet taken over by the battalion was a large rambling chateau, which, until quite a recent date had been used by the Germans as a Prisoner-of-War Camp. It was in a very dirty and dilapidated condition and the outbuilding in which the Headquarters Staff was billeted was rendered intolerably cold by reason of the large apertures in the walls, which did service as windows, having no shutters attached with which to shut out the cold November air.

Within the next few days we fully expected having to join in the advance into Germany, and, with this in view, we were for several days busily engaged in removing all traces of the last few weeks campaign from our equipment and guns. We were doomed to disappointment, however, and destined to stay in this particularly deserted and barren village for several long weary weeks.

Our rations were only fair, and although we now received from ten to twenty francs each week we were unable to

purchase anything in the way of eatables or those luxuries almost indispensable to many soldiers. Our Canteens were empty and the few civilians in the district were destitute and were being fed by the Army. There were no cosy estaminets into which our men could flock, as had been their custom when resting behind the lines before the commencement of the smashing victory in August. They were perforce to stay shivering in the wretched billets night after night, and week after week, there being very little enjoyment in tramping the dark country lanes on these cold and all too frequently wet November nights.

Since the signing of the Armistice demobilization had commenced, but it appeared to be proceeding very slowly, especially where the 5th Machine Gun Battalion was concerned, only some half dozen or more officers and men having been sent home.

At the end of four weeks our stay in the village of Jolimetz came to a close, and every man in the battalion was only too glad to get away from the monotonous life that had been our lot during that period. It was on the morning of December 13th that our battalion paraded in full marching order outside the billets, and commenced to march into Belgium which was to extend over a period of ten days. On the evening prior to marching away I had to leave the H.Q. Staff, and again rejoin my own Company. Each day's march during our migration into Belgium varied from about five hours to eight hours in which time we would cover about fifteen to twenty-five kilometres. One of the most interesting features which took our notice, especially during our first two or three days march, was the large quantity of German war material strewn on the road side and in the adjoining fields. At the end of our fourth day's march we arrived in the town of Le Louverie, having already passed through the fortress town of Maubeuge, in which we had rested one night, and the town of Binchie, lying about ten miles east of the war famous town of Mons. Our fourth day's march had been accomplished in a pouring rain, and on reaching the end of the day's journey we were all soaked to the skin. For the whole of the following day we were to rest in our billets in Le Louverie, which, by the way, was a very large barn three-parts full of straw, which made a soft and comfortable bed for the whole of "A" Company. On December 18th, we again went on trek very much benefitted by our day's rest.

For the next five days we continued our march through Belgium resting each night in the cottages or barns of the grateful inhabitants in whose village we had halted. The Belgians shewed their gratefulness to the British troops on their deliverance from German Occupation in many ways. While undertaking this long march, my company, on several occasions, when taking our regulation ten minutes' rest, were waited upon by women from the neighbouring cottages, who voluntarily gave many of us cups of hot coffee, while some of our kind benefactresses even brought out a number of chairs for us to sit upon and take our brief rest in comfort.

It was late in the afternoon of December 28rd after one of the heaviest marches we had accomplished since setting out on the 13th that we reached our final destination. This was a village called Suarlée situated some six kilometres west of the town of Namur, and the whole of "A" Company was accomodated in a large, unoccupied mansion known as "Suarlée Chateau." In the large and lofty rooms of this abandoned country residence we took up our abode, hoping that our stay would only be of short duration and that our next migration would be back to dear old Blighty.

Christmas Day was once more drawing near and the first day in our new billets was fully occupied in decorating the barren and uninviting rooms with holly and evergreen obtained from trees and bushes which grew in the grounds of the chateau. In order to make preparations for our Christmas Feast the cooks had arrived in Suarlée two or three days in advance of the company, and on our arrival the cooking of it was in full swing.

The 25th day of December was soon upon us and at two o'clock in the afternoon of the Festive Day, the rank and file of the company were once again seated round a number of crude tables awaiting our Christmas Dinner the appetising aroma of which already pervaded our dining hall. Our dinner, in spite of the fact that the company had only so recently arrived in the village after being on the move for a period of ten days, quite came up to that of the previous year's out in Italy.

On the whole, Christmas Day, was celebrated much quieter than was the rule on festive occasions.

December 25th, 1918, was the third anniversary of the formation of No. 4 Section, which was the first section of the 18th Machine Gun Company (now "A" Company, 5th

Battalion) to be formed. Our Battalion Colonel, who had also been "A" Company's first commander, when visiting our billets during the afternoon made enquiries for members of the original gunners of No. 4 Section, but, alas, many months had elapsed since the last of them had either been killed or wounded. No. 4 Section's casualties from the Battle of the Somme to the signing of the Armistice had been very heavy, and even of the thirty or so men who had comprised the Section on leaving the scene of the Great Battle of 1916, only six now remained.

Soon after the cessation of hostilities the work of reconstruction commenced among our fighting forces. This was to prepare us for our return to civilian occupation, and early in the month of December, 1918, many of the units in France and Belgium had established voluntary schools for instructing the men in commercial subjects and useful trades. The teachers of the various subjects were selected from the officers, N.C.O's., and men who possessed a fair knowledge of one or more of them. With the moving of the 5th Battalion into Belgium our Educational Classes were at a standstill until after Christmas. Having secured the loan of a small hall in the village of Suarlée our studies were once more resumed, and every week-day morning from ten o'clock till mid day two or more classes were regularly held in it. About ten days after the re-opening of our school the teacher of book-keeping, a Lance Corporal of "C" Company, returned to England for demobilization.

On being approached by our Battalion Educational Officer I agreed to take over this class, which consisted of some dozen or more students drawn from "A" and "C" Companies. Now that I was on the Educational Staff I was exempt from all daily parades, battalion guards, and all other duties whatsoever.

All parades and work were finished every day by half-past twelve, after which the men were at liberty to proceed either to the town of Namur, to the neighbouring villages, or enjoy themselves on the football field. Namur was a most interesting fortified town and was very frequently visited by all members of our Battalion. It was one hour's pleasant walk down a good main road, but the journey could also be accomplished in about fifteen minutes by boarding a train which travelled by the roadside from a village called Spy into the centre of the town. This roadside railway ran close

by our village, and the trains which passed every half-hour stopped to pick up any intending passengers. Almost every afternoon these trains were invariably crowded with English Tommies.

Signs of the early battles of August, 1914, were quite evident in the centre of Namur, where a large clearing indicated where the Boche guns had destroyed large blocks of buildings. Also on the roads outside the town were many blackened ruins of cottages and farms destroyed during the enemy's advance. Trenches and barbed wire entanglements still existed in the fields, as also did the circle of forts outside the town. One of these forts was situated on a hill within half-a-mile of the chateau in which "A" Company was billeted, and was called Fort Suarlée, after the name of the village.

The picture palaces in Namur were greatly patronized by the British soldiers, who were admitted to the afternoon performance at half-price. In one picture palace which I entered the seats were arranged on either side of long tables which passed from the front to the rear of the hall, while attentive waiters, during each short interval, passed up and down the tables taking orders for coffee, beer, wine, etc., and which were quickly supplied from the large bars situated at one side of the hall.

Our life in the village of Suarlée would have been a very dreary one indeed had it not been that we were within easy access of Namur. Next to the muddy trenches which we had so frequently manned during previous winters, this mansion in which we were living was doubtless the coldest and most miserable billet that "A" Company had ever occupied either in France, Belgium or Italy. Whenever we were prevented from going into Namur we usually made our way to one or other of the numerous estaminets in the village of Suarlée, and there passed the night away playing darts, card games, chess, etc. We had large fireplaces in all the rooms of our billet, but very little fuel could be procured to burn in them. During the first two weeks after we arrived at Suarlée Chateau a fire was kept burning for two or three hours every evening in most of the rooms, but the fuel had to be obtained by cutting down trees, and, I regret to say, also by removing the floor boards in the top attics. This latter depredation was not stopped before even many of the supporting beams had also been used for firewood. The

damage which was later claimed by the owners of the house ran into several hundreds of francs.

After much complaining we were at last supplied with sufficient firewood from Battalion Headquarters to keep one fire going all day in one of the rooms which had been converted into a reading and recreation room, but the rooms in which we lived had to remain fireless.

Whenever the weather prevented us from having our regular practice on the football field, the ball was invariably brought to the billet and kicked about inside the entrance hall and in the large room occupied by my Section. The numerous small panes of glass of which the large windows were composed, were soon shattered to pieces as a result of kicking the ball about inside, making our billet even colder than before.

On the 14th February I proceeded on my third leave to "Blighty," entraining at Namur for the French seaport of Calais. This was a special leave I had secured for the purpose of visiting my brother who was lying seriously ill at Connaught Hospital, Aldershot. Returning to my battalion again on the 2nd March, the few of my comrades who still remained at Suarlée Chateau were greatly surprised at seeing me back again.

Demobilization during the last few weeks had been proceeding at a brisk rate, and on rejoining my Company I found only some 7 or 8 men of No. 4 Section left. The other three sections were also greatly depleted, but strange to say, practically all the new arrivals of a few months ago, many of whom had less than six months service in the Army, had gone, while others with from two to four years service in the trenches to their credit, still remained. This exodus of men from the companies had, of course, considerably reduced the strength of our Educational Classes, and during my absence they had become more so and the School had therefore to be closed down.

During the first week in March all our guns, ammunition, and most of our transport were sent to Charleroi, where all the goods and chattels of disbanded units were being collected. One of my first duties after returning from my third leave to England was, along with three comrades, to accompany a number of limbers laden with boxes of ammunition to the ammunition dump in Gembloux. We arrived in this town about mid-day and when the work of unloading

the ammunition from the limbers was complete we obtained a pass from the officer who had accompanied us to stay here until evening and return by train at eight o'clock. Being in possession of a pass the Military Police let us pass into the station and board a passenger train on which we travelled free to a small station within two miles of Suarlée. Within the next week or ten days a great many of us expected to be on our way to "Blighty" for demobilization.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

### IN OCCUPIED GERMANY.

**O**N March 16th we left the village of Suarlée, and after a march of from four to five hours we arrived in another village called Sombreffe. All the men in the Battalion were split up into groups consisting of from one to eight or more men, each group being billeted in a separate house. Many of the men were very fortunate in being allotted to a billet at which the dame of the house set aside for their use one of her best bedrooms, including a soft feather bed with lily white sheets in the bargain. I was one of these lucky individuals. This was the first occasion during my three years' sojourn on the continent that I had ever occupied a billet in which I enjoyed the comforts of a proper bed.

We had only been at Sombreffe for a matter of two or three days before two-thirds of "A" Company had to sign the necessary papers appertaining to demobilization. These men were the remainder of us who had enlisted prior to December 31st, 1915. Once our papers had been filled up and signed we quite expected to be making tracks for "Blighty" within at least a week from that date. But unforeseen circumstances were destined to arise and delay our final homeward journey.

The most unlooked for and surprising of news came to hand about this same time to the effect that the 5th Machine Gun Battalion would shortly proceed into Germany. By way of confirmation all our guns, ammunition, limbers and mules that had been sent to Charleroi were brought back.

As three parts of the Drivers had been demobilized many Gunners had to take a turn with the transport.

All of us who anticipated being demobilized were not expecting to go into Rhineland, more so as word had come to us that a large number of men were on their way from

France to relieve us. We looked for our relief in vain, however, and on April 3rd the whole Battalion, including those for demobilization marched away to Charleroi Station where we were to entrain for Germany. Arriving here in the afternoon after a heavy march, we had straightway to commence the work of loading the train with our limbers, mules and baggage. When each Company had its full complement of men this was always a heavy job, but now that they were little more than one-quarter of their war-time strength, the work which fell to our lot on this occasion was exceedingly heavy. It was evening before the work of loading the train was complete, after which it was not long before we had commenced the journey which was to take us into the "Occupied Zone." Steady travelling throughout the night brought us by daylight on April 4th to within a short distance of the German borders, and long before mid-day we were passing through their territory.

Continuing our journey still further into the Occupied Territory the railroad and the adjoining land at frequent points was a veritable hive of industry.

We did not detrain at Cologne, the British Headquarters for the Rhine Army, but proceeded still further into the zone of Occupation until we reached the town of Troisdorf in the afternoon. This was the end of our train journey and we at once commenced the work of unloading our transport and baggage, but this was infinitely easier than the work of loading which we had experienced the previous afternoon, and in a little over two hours we had every limber and mule off the train.

Of our Transport Drivers the majority were purely amateurs having been pressed into this indispensable branch of our formation only a few days prior to leaving Belgium. I have no doubt but that many of them had not been astride a horse, let alone a stubborn, long-eared army mule, more than half a dozen times, while even several of them to my knowledge were making their debut as "Horsemen." Before we moved away to the village in which we were to be billeted considerable commotion and confusion took place among our long string of transport. This was caused by our inexperienced drivers being unable to cope with their restive mounts and it was not before our Transport Officer and one or two of the regular drivers went to their assistance that anything like order prevailed. One hour's march from Troisdorf

brought us into another small town called Seiglar, where Battalion Headquarters were being established. My Company, however, did not halt here but proceeded to the next village called Eschmar some two miles away. On arriving here we had to wait some little time while our officers made a tour of the billets available for our accommodation.

Meanwhile the children of the village quickly gathered about us until the time we were at liberty to proceed to our billets quite fifty or more had congregated together. The billet in which I presently found myself took the form of the front room on the ground floor of a neat and tidy little house situated in the centre of the village. Among the tenants of this house were two ex-German soldiers, one of whom, an artilleryman, had lost one eye only a week prior to the cessation of hostilities. During my short stay in the house this young German became a frequent visitor to my room, and from the broken French which he was able to speak I gathered that he had lost his eye while serving with his battery, which had been one of many opposed to the 5th Division during the last stages of the Grand Allied Offensive. The second ex-soldier who had been an Infantryman, was quite the reverse to his fraternizing brother, never acknowledging by word of mouth, or otherwise, any of my comrades or myself.

The Battalion being at such a very low strength no specified parades for each company were set forth, but each company on the day following our arrival into Germany commenced the work of overhauling and cleaning the guns, ammunition, etc., which they were all more or less in need of after being at the dumping ground in Chaleroi before we left Belgium. It was while we were busy with our guns that we were the unavoidable witnesses to what is probably a custom in Germany. One morning, a day or two after our arrival in this village we were very much surprised to see in the garden next to the yard in which we were working an open coffin containing the body of an old grey bearded gentleman. His white marble like hands were placed together above his breast in an attitude of prayer, while his wrists were chained together, as it were, with a rosary. All the morning a continual stream of villagers, including a large number of children passed through this garden to see the last of one who had evidently been greatly respected by them all.

During our short stay in Eschmar we were all free after 4 o'clock each afternoon to visit the neighbouring towns and villages, of which full advantage was taken. The splendid German Tram Service, on which all British troops travelled free, greatly facilitated our excursions to places beyond walking distance. One tramway route skirted the edge of the village where my company was billeted, and the majority of us made frequent visits via this route to the town of Seiburg, a distance of about ten miles away and a good hour's journey on the trams. Seiburg was a favourite resort for British soldiers stationed in the outlying villages, and in the evenings the trams were frequently so crowded that the German civilian population were unable to secure standing room, let alone a seat. Although notices were hung up in all cars to the effect that the conductor could refuse to take more than six soldiers in one car, I never saw a single Tommy prevented from boarding. More often than not the majority of the cars contained from four to five times as many British soldiers as civilians, while others of the German population had even to be left behind at the frequent stopping places to be picked up by the next car that came along should there be any room.

Seiburg, a modern town of some size, contained a large number of shops, stores and bazaars, many of which had their windows dressed with an attractive display of innumerable small nick-nacks and presents most likely to catch the eyes of shop gazing British Tommies. The men of the Army of Occupation proved exceedingly good and ready customers of the Boche tradesmen.

This town is quite a pretty one and when walking down one of the main thoroughfares called Kaiserstrasse one gets a remarkable and splendid view of a large palace-like building called St. Michaelberg, built on a high hill just outside the town.

On the last occasion that I visited Seiburg a most deplorable accident happened on the car in which I was making the return journey. The car, which was crowded to overflowing with Tommies returning to their respective villages, had proceeded some little way from Seiburg when several more soldiers clambered on to the footboard while it was still in motion. One of these incautious men lost his foothold and was precipitated to the bottom of the bank, on which the road was constructed; the drop at this point being

at least fifty feet. As soon as the conductor realized what had happened he immediately made a frantic effort to stop the car, and in so doing broke the communication cord. The car came to a standstill about twenty yards beyond the scene of the catastrophe, and medical aid was immediately summoned from a near by R.A.M.C., Station. His injuries were so severe that little hope was given for his recovery from the first, and on the following day I learned that he had succumbed to them some hours after being admitted into hospital.

The relief which we had heard some weeks ago was coming to the Battalion to take the places of all those who were waiting to be sent home for demobilization arrived at our headquarters in Seiglar on April 9th. About fifty of them were allotted to "A" Company. This influx of new arrivals overcrowded our billets and on the following day we removed to the small town of Seiglar where more accommodation was available. Our new billets were exceedingly comfortable, and all the men expressed great delight with them. Mine was a replica of the one I had occupied whilst we were stationed at Sombreffe, in Belgium.

My stay in Seiglar was to be of very short duration, for on April 11th all those for demobilization were informed that they would leave for the Demobilization Concentration Camp in Cologne the following morning, Saturday, April 12th. That long looked for day when I should bid good-bye to "A" Company (alias 13th Company) 5th Machine Gun Battalion had at last arrived.

About three hundred men and several officers composed this exodus of men from the Battalion, most of whose final departure for Blighty and civilian life had been delayed about four weeks. Marching to the Railway Station at Troisdorf we took train to Cologne which city we reached about mid-day. A short march of some fifteen minutes through many busy thoroughfares and past that magnificent pile of beautifully carved masonry the Cologne Cathedral, brought us to our destination.

This was a huge block of buildings used by the British Army Authorities as a collecting station for the men of the Army of Occupation proceeding to England for demobilization. At last I had reached the first stage of my final leave taking from the British Army.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

## HOMEWARD BOUND.

ON my arrival at the Demobilization Concentration Camp in Cologne I was supplied along with all the other new comers with some dinner consisting of the familiar Army Stew. All that afternoon the fifteen hundred to two thousand men who were concentrated in this large building were gathered in a large square adjoining and slowly divided into groups according to the locality in England to which we belonged. When we had been allotted to our respective groups each man had to pass through an office for the purpose of having his papers scrutinized, stamped, etc., by an officer of the Demobilization Staff. It was evening before we were at liberty to leave the building and take a stroll in the city if we were so minded. A comrade and myself contented ourselves with a gentle walk through several of the principal streets all ablaze with lights from the numerous big shops and emporiums and crowded with the citizens of Cologne among whom were sprinkled not a few British soldiers.

On Sunday we received our final instructions relating to our departure which was to take place the following morning, Monday, April 14th, in two parties. The first party was to leave by train as early as five o'clock, but the second party, to which I belonged, was not moving until after nine o'clock, when we were to proceed to the river and board a steamer which was to take us down the Rhine through Holland to Rotterdam.

Among the men from the 5th Machine Gun Battalion was one, a driver from my own company and at one time a gunner on the same gun team as myself, who hailed from the fine old city of York, of which I also was a native. For several weeks we two Yorkites had been anticipating making this eventful journey together, but at the eleventh hour, fate decreed that I should return to our native city alone. When we left the Battalion on Saturday morning, my fellow townsman had felt far from well and on Sunday morning he became seriously ill and was conveyed to the Military Hospital in Cologne. His case was very serious and instead of accompanying me to Blighty he lay in hospital, so I afterwards learned, between life and death for several days, and some

weeks elapsed before he was in a fit condition to be sent home.

Sunday afternoon and evening I spent in visiting numerous places of interest in Cologne in company with a trusted and esteemed comrade whose acquaintance I first made on the Somme Battlefield in 1916. The German's magnificent cathedral, a most noted work of architecture and adorned with much artistic sculpture, took up not a little of our time. I have no doubt but that most British soldiers when viewing this beautiful structure compared it with those ill-fated cathedrals, all of more or less equal magnificence in the cities of France and Belgium which had been so ruthlessly destroyed by the German shell-fire during the past four years of warfare.

Of the two staunch companions in whose company I still remained, one, Tom Teasdale, was included in the train party, so that I was left with my own countyman Harold Holmes, now a full blown sergeant, with whom to make this last journey to England.

Shortly after nine o'clock on Monday morning the several hundreds of us who still remained in the Concentration Camp (the train party having left the building in the early hours of the morning) proceeded through the streets of Cologne on our way to the river to embark on the steamer which was to convey us to Rotterdam. Arriving at the riverside quay we immediately commenced to file down a gangway on to a smart looking river steamer, the "Kronprinzessin Cacilie."

This was one of several German river steamers which had been taken over by the British Army Authorities and which were being used for the purpose of carrying Demobilization Parties from Cologne to the Dutch port. As we passed on to it we were split up into groups of from fifteen to twenty, each of which was termed a mess, and allotted to one or other of the numerous tables arranged about the deck. Each man was given a card bearing the number of his mess and also the name of the boat on which we were to make the trip across the North Sea on our arrival at Rotterdam.

It was about eleven o'clock before the Kronprinzessin Cacilie left her moorage and commenced the down river journey. We were all delighted with this unusual mode of transportation and as we steamed steadily down the not unpicturesque river Rhine my thoughts wandered to those of

my late comrades-in-arms who were proceeding homewards via rail in those all too frequently dirty horse boxes, and travelling at a rate, the slowness of which drives one to exasperation, especially when travelling towards Blighty. Early in the afternoon we had left German territory behind us and had entered Holland, and for the most part the river now flowed between low lying banks through a flat undulated country. Our meals were supplied from a large cook-house below deck and served out to each mess in bulk.

After a six hours pleasant and enjoyable sail the steamer came to a standstill alongside several barges on which we were to sleep that night. Before leaving the steamer each man received his bedding, two army blankets. These barges had been specially fitted out to furnish sleeping accomodation for men proceeding down the Rhine en route for demobilization. The holds were all securely covered in and made water-tight, entrance to which was by means of trap like doors and down what may be termed companion ladders. At the bottom of these ladders one found oneself amid a maze of wire matted bed frames four tiers high.

Having become acquainted with our lodgings for the coming night we went back to the steamer to spend the remaining two or three hours of daylight on deck.

With the assistance of a number of the men gifted with the powers of song and mirth, several officers, of whom there was quite a large party on board, got together an impromptu concert party, and for nearly two hours we all sat on the deck of the "Kronprinzessin Cacilie" listening to a right royal entertainment. At the conclusion we all trooped over to our respective lodgings on the barges highly delighted with our first day's voyage down the river Rhine.

Reveille on the Tuesday morning was at five o'clock as our steamer was due to move off again at six.

Between the hours of five and six several of the crew were continuously employed in drawing buckets of water from the river to enable us to make our toilet before the boat resumed her journey down the river again. Prompt at six o'clock the steamer left her moorage and proceeded once more in the direction of Rotterdam.

During the morning a whist drive was organized, keeping above one hundred of us who were taking part, well entertained for over two hours. By two o'clock in the afternoon

we had reached the Dutch seaport of Rotterdam, this trip down the river Rhine having taken only some fourteen hours of actual sailing.

For the second time during the journey our steamer came to a standstill alongside of several barges, but on this occasion they bore the usual appearance of such craft, not being fitted up as were our lodgings of last night.

With the assistance of planks and ladders we made our way off the river steamer into the holds of these barges, which as soon as all the troops had been transferred to them, were then manoeuvred about by steam tugs for some twenty minutes or more until they were eventually brought alongside a landing stage on the whole length of which stood very large store sheds and outside of one I noticed the familiar sign of the Red Triangle denoting the presence of the Y.M.C.A. Immediately on leaving the barges we were marched into one of these very large and lofty sheds and its inside appearance clearly indicated that this was to be our billet for one night at all events. Row after row of palliasses, on every one of which were laid four Army Hospital Blankets, were set out on the floor of this exceedingly large dormitory leaving only sufficient room to walk between them. Having been allotted each to one of these beds we were then informed of the next move we were to make. The S.S. Accrington on which we were to make our journey to England was leaving Rotterdam at five o'clock the following morning, Wednesday, April 16th. We all had to be on board shortly after four o'clock, which meant that reveille would be at the very early hour of three.

Later on in the afternoon a substantial dinner (and "Bully Stew" did not predominate) was served out to us in another shed fitted out as a dining hall, after which many of us betook ourselves to the Y.M.C.A., to spend the evening in reading, playing games and listening to a short musical entertainment which also took place during the evening. At a canteen run by the Y.M.C.A., we were able to buy what little supper we required, also cigarettes, tobacco, chocolate and various other items always in demand by the British Tommy. Before we could purchase anything, however, we had to exchange our German money at an office open for the converting of French, Belgian and German coin and notes into Dutch currency.

None of us were very late that night in getting between the warm and comfortable hospital blankets placed at our disposal.

A few minutes after three next morning saw practically every man up and making his way either to or from the wash house, situated outside and consisting of numerous tables with washing bowls galore. By four o'clock we had all been marched to another part of the docks, and were waiting to take up our places on board the S.S. Accrington. This steamer plied regularly across the North Sea, but was no bigger than the river steamer which had brought us down the river Rhine from Cologne, and many were the contemptible remarks passed about its probably unseaworthiness by the patiently waiting crowd of soldiers. As we boarded this sea-going vessel we were directed below deck which was fitted up with a network of ironwork so arranged as to form row after row of bed racks two tiers high all laced across with strong wire springs. The Authorities evidently thought that troops proceeding home for demobilization preferred to sleep the whole journey through.

At five o'clock we had commenced on another stage of this eventful journey.

Our embarkation officials had not forgotten to make ample provision for the feeding of the several hundreds of men on board for between the hours of eight and nine tea and bread and butter was served out to us by way of a second breakfast.

During the first hour or so very little motion was felt, but as we got further into the North Sea the boat commenced to roll a great deal. The motion of the vessel as she ploughed through the somewhat heavy sea became more and more pronounced as the hours slipped by, and by midday, when probably about half-way across it required some little practice before one was able to walk about without bearing the appearance of a person who has imbibed too freely of intoxicating liquors.

A second meal consisting of a good sample of thin and very greasy "army stew" was served out at twelve o'clock, but not being of a very appetising nature a big percentage of the men refrained from taking their portion, while many others were feeling too ill and sick to be troubled about taking any food for the present.

After an uneventful sail of twelve hours the S.S. Accrington steamed into Harwich harbour and by half past five every man on the boat had landed safely on the shores of Old England. At a buffet situated on the dock side each man received a mug of hot tea and a cake also two paper bags containing pork pies, biscuits and chocolate. The latter, no doubt, were intended to appease our appetites during what would in all probability be a long and tedious journey to the Demobilization Centre. From this buffet we went into the station close by where a train was drawn up by the platform for our reception.

One hour from the time we arrived at Harwich this train with its freight of highly excited crowd of "soon to be demobbed" warriors had steamed out of the station and was travelling at a rapid speed towards the great Metropolis. On reaching the city of London we were split up into batches according to the Demobilization Centre at which we had to report to receive our final dismissal. Myself and some fifty or so comrades who were to proceed to Ripon crossed over to King's Cross station by the Tube railway, eventually boarding a northward bound express. The town of Grantham was reached somewhere about 1.30 in the morning (being Thursday, April 17th) but here we were all somewhat non-plussed when a messenger from the Grantham Demobilization Centre came running down the platform shouting for all soldiers who were for demobilization to get out of the train with all their kit and baggage. As soon as the last of our party had been trundled out of the carriages, many of whom had been fast asleep, we formed up outside the station and moved away through the dark and silent streets towards the camp.

It was just three years ago that I had set out from this self-same town to join the hard pressed troops who were bravely holding their own in the trenches in the North of France and in Belgium. Many were the stirring events that had come into my life during those three long dreary years, the greater part of which, in duty bound, had been spent in our shell and bullet swept fire zone in those all too frequently mud and water-logged trenches of the Western Battle Front. Not a few of those events but what were impressed upon my memory for all time.

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

## DEMOBILIZATION.

**G**AINING the main entrance to Harrowby Camp we marched through the maze of hutments until, strange to relate, we came to the selfsame lines in which I had received my initial training as a machine gunner. We were now guided to a section of the hutments not a stones throw away from the actual hut in which I had lived during those five short weeks of training prior to leaving for the front.

A hot meal was served out to us immediately on our arrival, after which we turned in to secure a few hours sleep before daybreak. We were up again at eight o'clock and at nine we were waiting our turn to receive a final examination at the hands of the doctor before proceeding to the actual buildings where our demobilization was to be formally carried out. Following this examination each one of us had to pass through a hut in which we disposed of our fire-arms and equipment, and receiving in exchange for our valise a small sandbag in which to carry our few personal belongings. Next we had to pass through an office where we each received, after several formalities had been gone through, our demobilization papers, including a certificate of identity and numerous other papers and pamphlets relating to civilian life.

This certificate of identity, or protection certificate as it was also termed served the ex-soldier also as a warrant to procure his gratuity money and his weekly pay during his twenty-eight days of furlough. Each man also had to state whether he would have a suit of civilian clothing, or the sum of £2 12s. 6d. Last of all we were paid on account of our credits £2 to tide us over the days that would elapse before we could receive our final settlement from the Regimental Paymasters.

My demobilization had now been actually effected, but I was not yet free from the yoke of military discipline and control. Not one of us could leave Harrowby Camp until early in the afternoon when we were to be marched in a body to Grantham railway station, on reaching which, and not before, the military control of our movements would be removed. To make doubly sure that no one would attempt to leave before the stated time all our papers and passes were

temporarily taken charge of by the Demobilization Staff. After a last "army dinner" which happily, was free from the taint of Bully Beef in any form whatever I joined the throng of now demobilized troops outside the office where we presently lined up in readiness to make our last and farewell march. At the station each man was at liberty to enter the first train bound towards his particular destination. I had not many minutes to wait before a York-bound train steamed into the station. It was difficult to realize that one was at last a free man unfettered by army discipline or hemmed in on all sides by Army Rules and Regulations, but free to go wheresoever one chose, and to be, generally speaking, controller of one's personal doings at all times.

Thus late in the afternoon of the seventeenth day of April, nineteen hundred and nineteen, I arrived in my native city, free to take up the duties of a civilian once more.

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### CONCLUSION.

UNLIKE so many thousands of England's Volunteers who had been called upon during the four years of terrible warfare to fight for their King and Country and had returned maimed and crippled by the modern machinery and devilish devices utilized in present-day war, or undermined by disease and sickness, I returned (giving thanks to my Maker for His kind preservation of my youthfull life), with limbs intact, and health and strength unimpaired by the rigour of heavy and dangerous campaigning during the Great World War.

Again there are the several hundreds of thousands of our fellow countrymen who joined the ranks of our Great Citizen Army and went out to the numerous theatres of the Great War, but, alas, never to return again. These brave men will for ever live in the memory of their surviving comrades and the general public throughout the British Empire.

**GENTLEMAN UNAFRAID.** An after the war every day story of a wounded soldier ; the episode depicting the gradual development of a character which is seeking the solution of its own attitude towards life. By M. P. THOMASSET. Crown 8vo, cloth. Price 3/6.

The Bishop of London says :

" This is a very touching and interesting story, and one which is especially needed to be told at the present day. There is great danger ' lest we forget ' the great number of disabled men, both officers and men, who are in our midst, and the terrible trial which it is to many of them to feel ' out of it ' in the world in which, as the hero of this story was, they were once popular and successful. ' Gentleman-Unafraid ' shows how such a man conquers himself, and so wins a finer victory than ever he won in France.

" I hope many will read this story which can do them nothing but good."—*C. F. London.*

" A story which has come to our notice and is of singular beauty as well as of immense significance is that by M. P. Thomasset, entitled ' Gentleman Unafraid.' "—*Active Service.*

---

**THE FATHERS OF EVE.** A full bodied story of rural life cast in Essex and Devon. By " VERA KEEN." Crown 8vo, cloth extra. Price 3/6.

Depicts quaint village characters, faithfully drawn from life.

---

**THE MEDITATIONS OF A FLAPPER.** By ONE. A really humorous and naïve study of a modern flapper, by one of them. Crown 8vo, cloth extra. Price 3/6 nett.

---

**THE TRAIL OF SIN.** By MRS. HOLT. An interesting novel well worth reading. Crown 8vo, cloth. Price 3/6 nett.

---

**THE LEGATEE.** By JAMES GARLAND. A bright and interesting collection of stories—chiefly in the lighter vein. Crown 8vo, cloth extra. Price 3/6 nett.

---

**THE SISTERS.** By EMILY WOOD. A very charming and interesting novel. Crown 8vo, cloth extra. Price 3/6 nett.

---

**THE LITTLE MEDIATOR.** By OSWALD LOTHIAN. Crown 8vo. Price 3/6 nett.

' The reader . . . may cheer his heart in the midst of toil and worry or the world's rush with such pleasant tales as these.'—*Dundee Courier.*

---

**London : DRANE ' S, Farringdon Street, E.C.**

**A SUBALTERN IN SERBIA.** By CAPT. DONOVAN YOUNG.  
Price 3/6 nett.

A graphic and highly instructive chronicle of the events which attended the Anglo-French expedition to assist Serbia.

"It is an admirably written little book."—*Western Morning News*.

---

**THE DIAMOND LADY,** a Quest for Diamonds. By COUNTESS BERITA DE MONTALVO, author of "A Trip to South Africa," etc. Crown 8vo, cloth extra. Price 3/6.

"A smart breezy book . . . conveying a good deal of useful information."—*African World*.

"Brightly written and full of information."—*Sporting and Dramatic News*.

---

**STORIES OF SALONICA.** By A. GRIFFIN TAPP, M.C.  
Price 1/6 nett.

"A readable little account of adventures in Salonica and Palestine."—*Times*.

---

**AUSTRALIAN LIFE.** By A. T. M. JOHNSON. Crown 8vo, cloth. Price 6/- nett.

"The book has its value and the details given about the doings of the Kelly gang are written from the author's own first hand knowledge."—*Yorkshire Post*.

---

**REMINISCENCES OF THE NEAR EAST.** By H. H. JOHNSON. Crown 8vo, cloth. Price 6/-

"Makes for entertaining reading."—*Glasgow Herald*.

"Mr. Johnson discourses at first hand on the intricacies of professional and tourist life in the land of the Pyramids."—*Liverpool Courier*.

---

**CIRCLING THE GLOBE BY SEA AND LAND.** The record of a personal experience, by JAMES WALKER. Artistically bound in cloth. 44 Illustrations. 5 Route Maps. Price 10/6.

"One of those fascinating travel-and-talk books which are now-a-days so popular. . . . Here and there a vivid touch gives an illuminating suggestion of some phase of native life, custom, or religion, or of the character of the country through which the author is conducting the reader, and both atmosphere and life are admirably suggested."—*Liverpool Courier*.

---

**London: DRANE'S, Farringdon Street, E.C.**



17  
923 AUG

HM









NOV 30 1934

